



I Dated a Retired Hero (Blind Date Corporation #17)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: With every date more boring than the last, Litha quits the BDC. Why did everyone else get the thrill of romance, and she just got to hear about it?

Litha is stuck with a patron who likes to tell her about his dates with other women, and she is stuck with endless picnics and horseback rides. They aren't even fast enough to be interesting. Quitting used to be beyond her imagination, but now, it is all she thinks about. After her last disappointing date, she puts in her immediate resignation and settles in to think about her future. Working surrounded by happy couples for the rest of her existence isn't something she is willing to do, so working from home will have to be her thing.

A call from another government sets her on a mission to absorb some radiation as it is what she is best at. Standing in a field and pulling in power from a decade-old bomb suits her mood. The Uraddans had been insensitive, or perhaps they had enjoyed the thought of contamination, but when she cleared the site, she headed home, only to be called back to open the old casing in the middle of the space.

She didn't expect it to be difficult, but she didn't expect it to be occupied with the loveliest man she had ever met. He clings to her like she is the last safe place on earth, and when she stares into his starry eyes, she feels that she just might be.

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N ova Class Origin

Litha was working on her homework when she felt her hands tingle. She put her pen down and flexed her hands. She shook her hands out, picked her pen up again, and started the next sentence. The tingle returned, and a soft glow started.

Mom! Dad! Something is happening!

She walked to the living room, and her parents were already on their feet. Her dad darted away and came back with a scanner. How do you feel, honey?

Warm. Prickly.

Right. We are going to fix that, hopefully. Get in the back of the truck. We are going to the reactor.

Litha was shaking. What are we going to do there?

We are going to get you through your activation, huggy bear. Now, come on. Road trip! Her mom smiled.

Litha followed directions, got into the back of the truck, and hung on.

The drive to the reactor took forty-five minutes, and Litha didn't mind the wind. It helped cool her down.

When they got to the reactor, her dad flashed his credentials, and when the security

official came around to see her, he suddenly crumpled to the ground as her mom held her stunner. They drove up to the reactor entrance, and her parents began a crime spree of taking out all of the security staff, leaving those managing the tank and water levels.

Her mother said, Litha, jump into the tank. If you need to breathe, swim up and do it, but for now, just get in the tank. You know how the generator works.

The water boils, and it makes steam. Steam turns the turbines.

Honey, you are hot enough to boil the water, and this place will keep topping it up at a fast rate.

Litha could see the heat waves, and her shoes had already melted. Okay. I will go into the tank.

She waited until her dad opened the door and stepped clear, and when she was in, they closed it behind her. She looked at the churning water and her glowing body. With a deep breath, she jumped into the water, and it bubbled and churned around her, but she felt better.

Four days later, Litha climbed out of the tank and looked up at two guardians who were standing there with a towel. Here you are, little miss.

She took it and wrapped it around herself before fluffing out her hair and drying it. What happened to my parents?

They have been arrested and questioned. After sending an analytical talent to view your progress, it has been decided that your parents quick actions have helped to create the first nova class active.

What? Me?

Yes. There is a lot of training ahead of you, but you have a career on a team.

That doesn't sound optional.

The large male guardian looked at her and sighed. It isn't. It is either this or solitary confinement.

Oh.

How old are you?

Fourteen? She blinked up at them.

We will get you into the program, and you can begin learning to control your output.

Aren't I young to go into the program?

He smiled. You can't afford not to.

Litha held her towel and said, Right. Where do I start?

They escorted her out of the reactor and into a vehicle that had a contained space. It was an arrest vehicle.

They drove off with her wrapped in a towel and rocking on the seat as they headed for the research arm of the university. It looked like her parents didn't have to spend anything on her education. She was being tucked right into the best education centre in the area, and all she had to do was not leak radiation over the students. How hard could that be?

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T wenty-one years later

Litha sat through the first two rounds of interviews and was now facing the final boss.

So, I see you are an active. Zera smiled at her.

Yes. I don t let it get in my way when I work.

That is admirable. You were on one of the teams?

Yes, the stellar team, on special missions only.

You have been in space?

Yes. I specialized in meteor and asteroid interception. I did three tours and am now retired and ready to focus on textiles for difficult activations.

Oh, yes. I selected you for this round because of that. Z-Corp has a sterling reputation. It is so good that we are opening a branch in Aksalla that focuses on tech development. If you are willing to relocate, we can get you a work permit.

So, living in Aksalla?

Yes.

Are there restrictions on where I can live?

Zera smiled. No. That position pays one hundred fifty thousand.

Oh. Who would I be working with.

Dr. Kritz is our main developer, but his focus is biotech. The textile department would be entirely under you. Raises are regular, and bonuses for rapid response are common.

I see. She nodded. May I have a day to think it over?

Certainly, but if you are hungry, why don't we talk it over over lunch? Zera stood.

Uh. Sure. Litha looked at the woman who was younger than she was.

They got up, and Zera gave her a quick tour before going to the executive dining room. They were midway into a roast chicken dinner when a defender came in. Litha blinked.

Zera looked at him and sighed. You wrecked another one?

Litha looked past the purple skin to the torn uniform. What is that, carbon base?

Zera smiled. New polymer. Torun, this is Dr. Litha. Litha, this is Torun.

She was staring at the fraying edge of the cut and got up to examine the damage to the fibres. She heard a voice from above her. Does this pass for foreplay?

She muttered, No, but if you don't want your grape hide at risk, I will get to analyze the damage and components.

Zera snickered. So, Litha, where do you want me to send this contract?

Can I take a sample of the suit?

Torun smiled. If you can.

She smirked, pulled the fabric away from his skin, and used her free hand to draw a line that had a perfect oval of cloth in her hand.

Torun blinked. That s... that shouldn t be possible.

Zera smiled. This is why she s getting a contract. She s incredible. And she used to be a performer in the Capitol Ballet.

Litha ignored them and used her com to examine the tear with an enhanced view.

She started to mutter notes, and Zera and Torun started making out.

She agreed to the contract with a few modifications and became the textile department head of Z-Tech. Her parents would have been proud.

Litha got the tour of the new building and saw the crews who were working to finish things.

There was a woman on the electrician team who looked weak, and Litha looked at her with thermal vision. Oh, geez. Litha walked over and said, Excuse me, miss.

The exhausted woman looked at her. Yes?

Litha cocked her head. Do you need something to eat?

The woman looked grateful. That would be great.

Get up and come with me.

The woman rose up on wobbly legs. Litha took her to the commissary and asked if she had ever considered office work.

My two tickets make good money. The woman ate her third meal.

Yes, but they wear you out, which is causing you to lose a lot of the benefit by increasing that hunger.

The woman blinked. Oh. I haven't actually run the numbers before.

Well, if you do so, I will cover the costs of your certification and security screenings.

Why?

Litha smiled. Because I recognize people that I think will fit my grand plan, and your electrical skills will keep me from having to call maintenance constantly.

The woman paused and said, I make seventy-eight thousand a year.

Matched. I need an assistant, and I think you can use a job that uses your brain instead of your body. Your body is exhausted.

The woman sat back and sighed. I... yeah. I am. Will I have to go through HR?

Yes, but I will fast-track you. I need a reliable assistant, and you feel like the correct choice.

You don't even know my name.

Litha smiled. I don't. Mine is Dr. Litha.

Drinella. Drin. I will state up front that I am the emergency contact for my nephew. If I get a call, I go. Is that acceptable?

Sure. Litha chuckled. Do we have a deal?

Yeah.

Great. Let s go to HR and get you a stats sheet. Personally, my focus will be on sourcing, but they will want reports and things.

Sourcing?

Getting chemicals and new substances from around the world so that we can continue the research to provide specific actives with materials that will help them move through the world without being self-conscious or afraid of hurting those around them.

Drin perked up. That sounds like something I would like to be part of.

They shook hands and got Drin dessert before they headed down to HR.

Litha had her assistant.

Two years after that meeting, Litha sat in her office and listened to Drin and one of her partners in the outer office. The second masculine chuckle made Litha sigh. Two of them. Lovely. She forced down pangs of jealousy.

Drin had joined the BDC after Litha had, but her metabolic activation was easier to find partners for. Litha was still stuck with one match who just wanted to take her on picnics and rides in the park.

She felt a little grumpy when a date request came up on her com. She jabbed a denial. The last time she had been out with him, he had rushed to help a bus load of children tipping over a bridge and had been shocked when she had sliced the hands off the men who had been trying to take the children hostage. It wasn't so much slicing as burning the hands to ash so they couldn't use their detonators.

Her patron had rescued the bus, and she summoned a lift back to the city as he left her alone to face the agents and peacekeepers.

She walked into the BDC headquarters and removed her mask. Zera was in the hub and doing some paperwork. Wow, Litha. You look like hell.

Yeah, well, I think my foray into trying to find romance is over. She walked to the change room and changed into her normal daywear.

What if your patron calls for you?

Litha sighed. He can fuck himself or one of the other ladies on his roster. I am done. Done. Done. Done. I resign from the BDC.

Zera came into the change room. You are joking.

Litha looked at the woman who had become a friend. Not joking. I am so frustrated I want to carve an expletive on the moon.

Zera blinked. Please don't. What's really wrong?

Just what I said. I am so lonely my skin aches all the time, and there is no one willing to hold me. Litha looked at her. Don't even tell me that you know what I mean. I see you and the team together, and I just want someone to hold me the way they hold you. It's definitely desperation.

And howling loneliness. We have an escort who can give you a mental experience.

Litha shrugged. No. I don't think that would be a good idea. My self-control is all that keeps me from scorching the city around me. You remember all the panels I had to go through when you imported me.

Zera sighed. I... hadn't thought it through when I approved your patron.

Well, you can un-approve him, for me at least. He can find someone else to hang out with when he just doesn't want to look like he's solo.

I guess you two were a bad fit. You aren't helpless enough for him.

Litha turned to her friend and exhaled slowly. No. I am not. You didn't mention that in his dossier. Well, that explains the camaraderie that we have. I am just done.

Was there anything in particular tonight?

Litha dragged in a deep breath. A set of kidnappers. A bus was pushed to the edge of a bridge. I took out the detonators the guys had and their hands to the elbow. He got the bus back into position. We talked to the investigators, and he flew off.

He left you there?

Yeah. I am done. Done. Done. Done.

She smoothed her hands down her work skirt and exited the space. Consider this my official resignation.

Zera paused. From the BDC, right? Right?

Litha looked at her. I am going to think about it. I don't know if I can continue to be around so many happy couples. It's wearing on my nerves.

Her friend froze. I hadn't considered that. Oh, god. Right. We can reassign Drin.

No. It's fine. I am just going to confine myself to the lab and turn out reports. What I was hired for.

Zera reached for her, but her hand stopped short of Litha's skin.

Litha chuckled dryly. The one activation even you don't want. Right. I am going to work. There isn't anything else.

She headed to the main elevator and switched over to the lab elevator. She slapped her card on the scanner and worked her way into the depths of the lab levels.

She looked around, delved into her work, and tried to make a living bandage to be applied to wounded actives in the field. The theory got her several grants, and now, she just needed to make it practical. She may as well.

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Zera contacted Harmik. So, what happened tonight?

He didn't pretend not to know. She's an active.

Of course. All the women you have dated are actives. She's just more dangerous than most.

She disarmed the attackers with the flick of her finger. Literally. I can't be romantic with a woman who has all the earmarks of a stellar activation. She's too much for me.

Harmik, you were dating Tirra.

Yes, when she needed someone to support her. The escort I saw tonight doesn't need anyone.

Zera stared at the screen with her mouth open, and then, she closed it with a snap. Right. Good evening.

Wait. This won't affect my access to the other escorts, will it?

Zera shook her head. No. It won't. Good night.

The screen went dark, and Zera looked around. Well, fuck.

She called Arcady, and the soft giggles that arrived before Arcady's features were visible gave Zera a sudden understanding of what Litha was dealing with.

Zera, what is up?

Can we take this private?

Arcady sobered and climbed out of bed. What is it, Zera?

I think Litha is going to quit, and my successful matchmaking is to blame.

What?

Litha blocked her patron tonight. There was an issue, and she helped rescue a busload of kids, and he didn't feel that she needed him, and that is his kink.

Oh. Right.

And I think she might be on the edge of leaving Z-Tech.

Fuck. Why?

Zera winced. Everyone is having sex but her. She s lonely. Even Harmik only held her hand, and her attacking the guys kidnapping the kids was a complete turnoff.

Arcady s eyes widened. Oh, right.

And she s in her mid-thirties and tired of waiting. I think she s gonna retire.

Oh, no.

Zera nodded. Oh, yes.

What can we do? Arcady muttered. Find a black hole?

No jokes. She has gotten us all the military uniform contracts that we have received in the last five years. And so many emergency wraps and assists that can be carried by anyone. We ve won more awards with her work than with Kritz s.

Arcady blinked. Well, what does she like?

Zera paused. I don t know.

I think we need to figure it out.

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As Litha flew home from the shower on Daycross, she thought about her future, or lack of it. She had always assumed she would have some kind of family. She wanted

someone to hold who would squeeze her back without fearing her. She hated that people were afraid of her. It had been fun at first, but now, it made her heart sink.

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Litha left her lab after making strides on the intelligent bandage and rubbed her temples in the lift to the garage. Eight hours of working on her day off and she still couldn't guess at a solution to being alone. The more her friends all paired up, the louder the howling inside her became. She was happy for them, she really was, but Mother Nature had made her deadly, and that was a hard sell.

Hell, even the Blade of Uradda had found a partner. Nelith was a wonderful person and feared anywhere that Uradda had wanted to take over. She was getting married to an Eraddian ambassador this weekend. Litha was invited but didn't think she was going to go.

Her com went off, and Xeva's face was there, looking flushed and excited. Litha, when are you coming?

Uh... I don't think I am.

What? We need you here. Nelith wants you to walk her down the aisle.

I am not really in a party mood, Xeva. I am serious.

Xeva nodded soberly. I get it, but Nelith has been through a lot, and she really needs this. She wants her friends around her. Please.

Litha looked down at her jeans and tee. I have to find something to wear.

Come here. We have whatever you need.

Fine. I am on the way.

You know where we are?

Yes. I have been there before. Years ago. She left her house and locked it up, looking at her little farm and barn before she rose in the air and directed herself to the islands.

Apparently, she was attending a wedding. The sonic boom followed her as she kept the speed she needed to get there just after their breakfast. She could turn to light and travel that way, but it was showing off.

She saw the gathering of people on the beach, and the children jumping up and down at her approach made her smile. She landed on the sand, walked toward the crowd, and turned around. Who are we watching for?

Xeva walked out with a grin. You, Litha. One of the island guardian s brothers has all the action figures he could find, and when I told him Plasma was coming, he lost his mind. You are one of the rarest figures, but he does have one.

I had forgotten about that. They only released those when I was out of the stellar corp.

Xeva hugged her. Well, here you are, new in a box. That is an honour. Come on, we are getting you dressed and maybe something in your hair.

She was bustled into the bridal prep area and smiled. Oh, Nelith, you look lovely.

You look like casual Friday at a barn. Get changed. The bride was blushing and smiling.

Xeva held up a wrap and smiled. Come on. Get nekkid, oh, and let your hair down.

Litha dressed in the pink and gold sarong and slipped on the sandals. She loosed her hair, and it tumbled past her shoulders down to her hips.

Nelith smiled. I always forget how gorgeous you are.

It is something that does me no good. But you are stunning today as well.

Nelith grinned. Thank you. I feel pretty. You would not believe how many of my sisters are on this island. I think almost all of them are here.

Oh, why aren't they walking you down the aisle?

Because you are here. You helped lift me out of depression, showed me how to speed my recovery, and told me that being depressed because of my situation was fine, but there was a world moving around that had things that were fun to participate in. You gave me mom-advice, and it was the first time someone had done that in decades.

Litha finished getting ready. It was just nice talking to someone else who had been fucked over by their activation.

Nelith paused. Ouch. What's going on?

Nothing. Nothing. I am cleared for dating by the BDC, but no one will take me up on it. I have had nothing but platonic dates, and even my last patron just gave up when he saw a flick of my power. He likes helpless ladies.

Oh. Damn.

Xeva walked up and hugged her, and Nelith moved toward her in her peach and gold dress, stroking her cheek.

Litha chuckled. This is the most physical contact I have had in twenty-five years.

Nelith frowned.

Litha said, Hey, hey. Calm. I told Xeva I was going to be in a mood today.

Nelith nodded. It is understandable. I got plenty of hugs and touches from friends.

Litha smiled. Please let the ceremony start soon.

A young woman darted in, and the scent of honey came with her. Aunties, we are ready to go. Hello, ma am.

Hello. You are Nelith's niece?

Xeva shrugged. Niece, granddaughter, it is hard to say.

The young woman smiled. The flowers are here. So, as you come out, you will be bedecked.

Xeva smiled. Me first.

She kissed Nelith's cheek. See you on the battlefield, sis.

Nelith grinned.

They waited, and then, Xeva beckoned for Litha to come out, and as she stepped into the light, she felt a coronet of wide, soft petals land on her, another on her neck, wrist, and ankle. Nelith came out last, and she was covered in brilliant blue flowers in a heavy collar of sweetly scented petals.

Nelith smiled. So, one day only.

Litha laughed. One day only.

Music had started, and Xeva began a stately walk with a bouquet. Litha took Nelith's hand, and when the niece nodded, they started their slow walk up to the promontory.

There were many of Dmitri's people and tons of Xeva's and Nelith's. The similar features made her smile, but there was one missing. Litha knew one of Nelith's descendants, and she wasn't here.

She looked around, and the leaves shifted in a tree. Oh, there she was.

Litha smiled, and they walked up to where Dmitri had his hair flowing loose and was wearing a sarong around his hips. When he saw his bride, he smiled slowly, his serious devotion to her filling his posture. When his face began flowing through the six beings that inhabited his body, Litha smiled. Good thing they only emerge one at a time.

Nelith softly muttered, Yeah, but they line up.

They softly giggled as they walked to the top, where the chief of the island was waiting to conduct the ceremony.

Litha handed her off to Dmitri, inclining her head, and he looked at her as if trying to place her.

She stepped back, and Xeva directed her to a seat in the front row.

The officiant smiled. Before the vows, I have been asked to ask the following questions. Who gives this woman to this man?

The rows of descendants stood up. We do.

The officiant smiled and asked, And who will avenge her if she falls?

Litha stood and said, I will.

Nelith smiled, and Litha sat down again.

Dmitri leaned toward his bride and whispered, she whispered back, and he stood straight with a snap.

Nelith chuckled and patted his chest. The rest of the event went off without any diversion.

Litha sat with some of Xeva's siblings, eating and smiling and chatting. She felt gazes from the groom's side but socialized with the women who were her age and younger.

One of Xeva's soon-to-be brothers-in-law came to her with a package with a familiar figure. Ma'am, are you really Plasma?

Yes, I really am.

He held out the box with a marker. Would you sign this?

Won't that wreck the value?

No, I keep the collection because actives who defend our world are something I aspire to be.

Wow. That is unexpected. Sure. Hand me the figure. I don't need the marker.

She carefully turned the box over, carefully signed in fire, and then covered the signature with her hand to put it out.

There. Nice and official, and the only one I have ever signed like that. She checked it. And I didn't light the box on fire. That took a long time to master.

He looked at it, and his eyes lit up. Thank you. Did you ever work with Xeva?

Only twice. The rest of the time, I was in space.

You can breathe in space? His eyes bugged out.

No, I don't need to breathe in space. There is enough radiation there to keep me alive. I absorb it rather easily, and when I do that, I can eat it.

The groom got up and wandered over while Nelith continued her lunch.

Miss Litha, may I speak with you?

Sure. Here or on the move?

Away from the crowd, please.

Sure, General. She got up and nodded to the ladies she was sitting with.

They walked toward the trees, and Litha said, So, what do you want to talk about?

You are Plasma, yes?

I was. Now, I am a textile researcher. I met Nelith when I made a compression suit for her scars.

But you are immune to radiation.

Correct. Bravo. Few put that little factoid into action.

We have an area that the Uraddans bombed to keep it uninhabitable, and they did a good job.

Right.

Can you go in and mitigate the radiation?

Sure. When?

He didn't seem to be expecting that.

We are spending the week here on a honeymoon, and when we are back in Aksalla, may we talk?

I am planning a long sabbatical, so is there anyone else who can just point me at the site? I can go there from here. Litha checked her com. Hell, I can go there now.

You aren't staying for the party?

Not really a party person. She shrugged.

He frowned. Why not?

Never really saw the point. It is wonderful that you and Nelith have found each other, though. So many folks would be wary of her slicing them up.

I trust her not to do that. She trusts me not to push her too far.

I guess that is what it comes down to. My level designation had to be on my file, and all I could get was one guy who just wanted to feel manly without having to exert himself. If I have one more fucking picnic in the park, I am going to make it into a desert. She laughed.

He blinked. Right. Let me see who I can contact. It is a ten-mile circumference. How long will that take?

Two days?

Two days? It has been a wasteland for twelve years.

So, two days... Litha shrugged. Maybe less.

He shook his head and nodded. Can you let Nelith know what I am looking for?

Sure. A babysitter.

He startled into a snort. Something like that.

She nodded and wandered over to speak to the bride.

She settled near Nelith, and when her friend leaned over, she whispered, He has a radiation cleanup project for me. He s looking for a babysitter so I don t scorch the countryside.

Nelith asked, Could they stop you?

Litha snorted. No. Anyway, just wanted you to know why your groom was distracted. I like those rings.

Nelith wiggled her heavily laden fingers. Twelve rings with two on each index finger. Weighing me down.

Litha chuckled and touched her head to Nelith's. Have a great day.

Wait. Are you leaving?

Not feeling the party.

You have to wait until the first dances.

When is that?

Another twenty minutes.

Okay, but just because you are so cute when you are happy. Litha smiled.

Nelith smiled. Thank you.

Litha walked off to the treeline and murmured, She would like to meet you.

A soft hissing voice said, She doesn't know me, and I am s-s-stuck again.

Aw, I would help if I could. Where have you been?

There was a soft hissing laugh. Playing.

How many did you play with?

Five or six. Two were hiding together. I found them, and they are no more, but now, there is a price on my head in the capitol... again.

Litha snorted. So that is four governments that are looking for a feral active.

You know I love that name. It makes me feel ferocious.

Pervert.

The voice cackled. It was a lovely ceremony. Dmitri's guys were checking you out.

Good for them. I am swearing off men. And women and electrical appliances.

The voice was soft. I am sorry, Litha. I know that you had dreams that you can't have or a partner you can't find.

Thanks. I think I just hit a wall. All hope is gone. I am going to stop trying and just tuck into working from home and let Drin be my hands at the lab. I don't want to see people anymore. I am so tired of trying. It is easier to be alone if you are the only person in the room.

A clawed, scaled hand reached out and touched her shoulder. I would hug you, but I am both naked and grubby.

And stuck in a lizard-woman shape?

That, too.

Litha put her hand over the claws. Thank you.

You are welcome. Are you going to dance?

What?

Nelith wants you there for the dancing; that means you will dance.

Oh. With whom?

I am sure they will let you know. She chuckled softly.

Nelith looked her way and waved her over.

That was a fast twenty minutes.

I suppose everyone is together. That is what normally happens.

Litha smiled. I will talk to you soon.

Feral chuckled. Oh, yes. I do so enjoy visiting. How is the farm?

Quiet. It is between growing seasons.

Dang. I miss it when it is lively.

Me, too. Well, I guess I have to go. Take care.

You, too. And don't be too sad. You will still have your time. Feral chuckled. He's waiting for you somewhere. I am sure you will find him soon. Coming here was the first step.

Litha looked over her shoulder and stared at the midnight scales and golden eyes. You have seen something?

I have seen many things. Feral chuckled. That is how I roll. I am glad you are on your path, though. It is about fucking time.

So, you see someone for me? No other seers have. They all said there was nothing visible.

That was then; this is now. Now you were at a party with people who don't know who and what you are.

Litha smiled. Thanks. Hope is something I haven't felt in a while.

I know. Go and dance, and then head off wherever Dmitri has in mind for you. That's your path. Just be yourself.

If I do that, people die.

They did when you were a child. You aren't a child anymore. You have internal shielding and decades of practice now. Check it out; I got a tail this time. Feral turned and wagged her scaled tale.

Litha was startled into laughing and nodded. Thanks for making the effort.

Litha, thank you for being worth it.

Feral chuckled and darted into the shadows, leaving Litha to face the dance floor.

The Erradian that she was dancing with moved carefully. He asked, You are a friend of the bride?

Yes. I helped her out when she first surfaced. I was brought in as a sort of therapy while they asked me to make a suit to help her injuries. She shrugged. You are a friend of the groom?

Yes. I am his uncle.

Ah, well, then you have met him. She chuckled.

Are you married? The Aksallan women don't wear bands.

Oh. No. Never found a partner to take the risk.

He looked like he wanted to continue flirting but was stuck. When the song ended, he nodded over her hand, and they parted ways.

She walked to the edge of the cleared dance area full of locals and the happy couple. She opened her com and had the custom suit in Erradian style that would let Nelith do what she needed to do in style.

Litha stood aside and waited for Dmitri to finish on the dance floor. It took longer than twenty minutes, but he and Nelith looked so happy she didn't want to interrupt.

When they finally parted after the sixth song, he kissed Nelith's cheek and walked over to Litha.

I have an escort for you and the necessary coordinates. Are you ready to travel now?

Yes.

If you run across any of our people who are not enthusiastic about your presence, please only kill what is necessary.

She smiled. Very well.

Her com chirped as the location was sent. She smiled at Dmitri. Thanks. Do you want to be alerted when it's done?

Certainly. What will be necessary after the radiation is absorbed?

Manure and clean soil. The land will be dust because I will fight fire with fire, so to speak. Maybe add some clean or moldy straw all chopped up and plow it in. You can probably get it bioactive in a year if you have the right actives.

He smiled. Thank you for doing this. We have been scrambling to figure it out, but the amount of radiation required is extreme.

And then Nelith mentioned me.

Correct. I have checked with our team, and your recorded stats match what we need.

Will be glad to be useful. She checked her com. Right. I can be there in ninety minutes if I get changed and leave now.

Dmitri blinked. You aren't going to stay for the rest of the celebration?

No. I am not in a celebrating mood, though I wish you joy, and I have sent a gift that will make Nelith look like an Erradian defender. She mused, I think my next meal will be radioactive contaminants.

He frowned. Please stay. Nelith is so happy you are here.

Waiting for other's happiness is what has led to this mood. I am heading out, but congratulations. The Blade is quite a catch.

She is. If you must leave, thank you for the effort you are about to engage in.

No problem. This is my gift to you, by the way.

He smiled. Thank you. We are having a reception in Aksalla in a week. Will you come to that?

Doubtful, but I might not be so pathetically lonely by then and have moved on to personal isolation by choice.

He blinked. You don't have a partner?

No. I have been looking for years but keep scaring the poor little things. She snorted. Have a great party. She's a wonderful woman.

You don't want to catch the bouquet?

No, it is better off going to ladies who have a chance at getting laid. Goodbye, Dmitri; goodbye, crowd.

She backed away, and Nelith walked to her and smiled. You really won't stay?

Litha looked at the happy people dancing, flirting and holding each other. Tears started to flow. No, but I hope you have an amazing time. Blessings to you, Nelith.

She kissed her friend's cheek and walked back to change into her casual clothes that she had crafted to withstand her radiation. When dressed, she checked the location and took flight, going as fast as she could away from the sight of all that love and laughter.

* * * *

Nelith swallowed. Oh, damn. I didn't think it had gotten that bad, but she did say she had been bodyguarding for new couples, attending baby showers, and the like. Fuck. I should have let her stay home.

Dmitri was still staring at the burn of light in the sky where she had lit the atmosphere. What kind of active is she, besides radioactive?

Oh, she's nova class. As far as we know, she's the only one alive. They normally don't survive activation.

How did she survive?

Nelith smiled softly. Her parents were getting hints of her activation, so they prepared, and when she started glowing, they broke into a nuclear power plant, and she was in the tank for a week. When she came out, she was stable but still leaking a little.

Why didn't she get a mate then?

She was fourteen.

Ah. That would do it.

Her parents died from radiation exposure, but they didn't regret it. She saved the world more times than I can count, and they saw her do it.

But she wants a partner?

Yes. For the same reason I went for assessment at the BDC. She's lonely. The issue is she needs astral class if she wants them to survive more than one encounter. She was dating one casually, but he wanted women who were helpless. She had the bad taste to save some kids while on a date with him.

Ah. Fragile ego.

He isn't looking for someone like her. He wants someone who is physically vulnerable. She pretended to be for a while, but he didn't make a move.

So, she's frustrated, lonely, and watching a wedding with couples and teens and laughter that must sound like glass to her ears.

Nelith exhaled. I am an ass. I just wanted my friend with me.

I think she knows that, but she's hurting right now and is trying to lose herself in work.

Can she do that with this assignment?

He kissed her temple. I hope so. It will certainly push her endurance.

How did I get so lucky as to find you?

You let yourself be taken in as a war criminal.

Oh, right. Now we are on a beach, and you are in a skirt that doesn't cover much. She smiled.

Come on and circulate amongst our guests and your family.

Nelith nodded and returned to the party. Litha was resilient. She could bounce back from this. I hope.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

Litha was thirty minutes from landing when she got a call from Zera. Hey, Zera.

What are you doing, Litha? You are way out of allowed space.

I am going on a radiation cleanup mission. File it under humanitarian work.

You can't just fly off. You know that. Zera sounded worried.

I don't give a fuck. I am done caring about the rules and moods of everyone around me, Litha muttered.

Zera said, We will find someone for you.

Fuck that. I am not waiting anymore. I have done my work for the capitol and Aksalla, hell, even Z-Tech. You have all taken what you needed, and I got nothing.

Litha, you don't sound like yourself. Stay where you are, and we will track you.

If Torun is one of the ones to come or any of your lovers, you will be getting a bag of ash and my regrets when I return. I have smiled, I have laughed, and I have tried to therapy the loneliness out of me, but all I have left is the same burn that the male actives have. The mate compulsion is driving me nuts.

Zera paused. Wait. What?

In non-actives, it is called a biological clock. I want a partner, I want a family, and I haven't even been allowed to go looking for it because of those stupid regulations.

Shit. I didn't notice.

Of course not. Too many happy little employees getting their happily ever after.

Litha-

Dropping altitude. Don't send anyone happy. I will fucking turn them to ash. She ended the call.

Litha could see the empty black circle on the landscape and dove for the epicentre. She pulled up and settled near the origin point.

Burned. There was no other description. There was ash and dust charged with radiation all around her and the remains of a very large device in the middle of the space. It looked like a standard crater with a nine-foot tube in the middle of it. The radiation was coming from the tube.

A short examination later showed her that the metal itself was the infected source. She nodded. Good place to start.

Litha put her hands on the metal and practiced something she rarely had a chance to do. She ate the radiation.

It wasn't something she mentioned to most folks, but she could pull it in and hold it until she was in a spot that was safe to let it go. Litha smiled. That was just what she needed.

This was the one moment in her life when she didn't want anyone around her. When she was working, she loved being alone. Less issues with folks getting hurt.

She continued draining the radiation for hours before the metal was inert, and there

was no more wavelength coming from what appeared to have been the bomb.

Dmitri's voice came through her com. Litha. Please proceed northward and meet your liaison. He is agitated.

Fine. I took care of the source. Now, I have to work on cleanup.

The source?

Giant canister in the middle of the area.

There was a pause. I will get back to you.

She snorted and floated toward the north end of the scorch wave. If it had been ten years, they must have shielding around it, or the entire mess would blow all over the continent.

There was someone waiting for her in the distance, and she moved, standing straight with her feet inches above the ground. It looked creepy as hell, but it got her from place to place.

When she thudded into the barrier, she congratulated herself on being right as she rubbed her nose from the impact.

The person on the other side stood in front of her. You were supposed to report to me. He looked similar to Dmitri but with brilliant green eyes and black hair.

I was agitated and thought to see the detonation site. I have nullified the bomb casing, so that was most of what I needed to do. I can clean up the rest in a few hours. What are your restoration plans for the soil?

Biologically active materials and a row of farmers with radiation resistance and plows.

Good. So, why did you want to chat?

We have been notified that there is a team from the capitol coming for you.

Litha smirked. They will have to wait. I am busy.

Why are they after you?

I am supposed to ask for permission before leaving. I did not. They have panicked.

The man smiled. Why?

Oh, they consider me dangerous. Silly. She shrugged. I am going to get back to work. Now that I took out the centre, I can work from the edges in.

Do you need food... or rest?

No, I will be fine. When I shoot skyward, I will be done. This is easier than I thought. The radiation is very consumable.

He smiled. Good to know it. My name is Petrov.

Litha. I would shake your hand, but it might melt skin right now. I will chat more when I am done.

He nodded. I will be here when you are finished. Probably holding off a team of agents.

She smiled and turned her back to him, moving slowly and pulling the contamination from the soil. The marathon had begun.

She worked through the night and into the following day. When she couldn't detect any more harmful wavelengths, she looked around, nodded, and shot skyward. She passed the team member who had been watching, and he let her go. In her jeans and tee, she didn't look like she was carrying enough power to melt an active simply by proximity. She climbed higher and higher until she had freed herself from gravity. Since she could survive on sunlight, she didn't need to breathe, and then, she let the confined power go in a steady wave.

It was warm, it was relaxing, and she fell asleep.

Re-entry woke her. Damn. I always forget about this part. She fell, and the world turned to fire around her.

She fell, and the moment she hit the atmosphere, she returned to the site. Petrov was sitting with the team members, and she looked at him. Can you run a final sweep and make sure that I didn't miss anything?

The drones already went out and came back. Petrov smiled. We are clear, and we can't thank you enough.

She nodded, and then, she turned to the team as they got up and stepped toward her. She snorted. Fuck all, ya ll.

She kicked off and flew home as fast as she could. They had no chance to catch her, but she really needed to get some sleep. Finally, the sadness was gone, and she just felt numb. She could sleep with numb.

A polite knock at her door got her out of a heavy sleep. She jerked up and staggered

to the door, wearing only a tee. She was rubbing her face as she opened the door to Zera and the Aksallan prefect.

Titanium. How nice to see you. Please come in and read me the arrest warrant. It should put me right to sleep. She nodded to her boss. Zera.

Litha... you look fine.

Thanks. I am still tired. She yawned. I haven't done an absorption like that in years.

Zera lifted a small object. You are clear.

Yeah. I know. Sorry. You woke me.

Zera sighed. Please have a seat.

Litha walked to her couch and sat, propping her head on her fist. So, what brings you here, Madame Prefect?

We have had an offer for you. She grimaced.

Oh, that sounds intriguing. Do tell.

Zera snorted. It is a job offer... of sorts.

Curiouser and curiouser. Litha yawned.

The Erradians are impressed with your skills, and they want you on standby when they open the object in the zone. They don't trust it not to be as radioactive as the outer hull was.

Litha nodded. Sure. I just want to get some more sleep.

They are offering you accommodations there. A transporter will bring you over. You just need to get dressed first. Do you agree? The prefect was looking at her.

Litha shrugged. Sure.

Miss, what happened? You used to be so cheerful. The prefect was staring.

Oh, that was when I had hope. Hope has since been flushed. I don't get to be like everybody else, so now, I don't give a fuck.

The prefect asked, Have you tried the BDC? They found a match for Salat, and if they can find that, they can find anyone.

Litha turned to Zera. You tell her. I will get my suit.

By the time she was dressed in her armoured bodysuit, the prefect was looking so sad. Zera was looking depressed.

Litha yawned again. Right. Where is my ride?

Zera said, You don't want to think about it?

Nothing changes for me except my location. I am still dangerous, I am still alone, and I am still mad about it. So, while I contemplate my options, I am just going to keep busy.

Zera said, What about your lab?

I can do a lot of the textile designing anywhere and send it to my machines. Right

now, I am less than inspired.

Zera swallowed and nodded. Fair.

We will talk again if I ever calm down. Right now, the unfairness of life is hitting me like a toddler deprived of candy. It is either keep busy or head to the sun. I am not much in the mood for anything else.

Zera looked sad. Got it. Petrov is waiting.

Petrov? I thought he was a botanist.

He is, and he also has the transporter activation.

Oh. Okay. See yah. She walked out and saw the Erradian in her garden, checking on the dormant plants.

She watched as he stroked the plants and then turned his head to her. They are radiation-resistant.

Well spotted.

Would you let me bring samples?

Why don t you come back and raid my garden after we finish clearing that canister?

He stood straight and nodded. Fair enough, ready?

Yeah.

He walked out of the black and green rows and said, I will have to hold you to pull

you with me.

Sure. I am keeping everything under wraps, so you should be safe.

Petrov nodded. I am not worried. Ready to go?

Litha smiled slightly. Yup.

He wrapped her in his arms, and she remained stiff and straight while he laughed. This won't hurt.

I know. I am just trying to prove I am paying attention to control. She looked toward her house and saw Zera staring. She called out, Lock up, would you?

A dark green mist wrapped around them, and when it dissipated, they were back in Erradia.

She smiled. Right. When do we crack open the canister?

I thought you needed to rest first.

I can get this over with and then go home afterward.

I am only able to transport once per day.

She looked up at him. That's a lie.

He shrugged. Perhaps. The local villages are relieved that the site has been neutralized. They would like to throw you a party.

She stepped back. A party?

Yes. Music, dancing, a variety of dumplings that will make your head spin. He chuckled. Oh, and pickles. Lots of pickles.

Litha cocked her head. Tempting.

Well, it is part of the agreement that got you here.

She blinked. There was an agreement?

Yes. There are treaties in the work between Aksalla and Erradia, and you are one of them.

I am on loan? Like a vehicle rental? That struck her as funny, so she giggled.

He smiled. Nice sound. Well, the local village has set up an empty house for you to rest in. We don't want you facing whatever is in that canister if you are sleepy.

Fine. Lead the way.

Can you fly me? It is that way. He gestured to the west.

She laughed. Why didn't you transport us there?

I wanted to talk to you first.

Oh. Okay. Here we go. She lifted off and grabbed him from the back, easing him into the air and flying at a speed that wouldn't suffocate him.

When they arrived at the village, a crowd had gathered. She set Petrov down carefully and landed beside him.

He chuckled. That was very smooth.

Thank you. I have done it a time or two.

He offered her his arm, and she placed her hand on his wrist. They walked forward, and she was introduced to Havil, the headman of the village, and Veru, his wife. She looked at Litha and touched her cheek. Such a pretty little girl.

Litha laughed. The woman was in her late twenties. Thank you for the compliment, but I am just short, not young. I am entering my late thirties.

The woman snatched her hand back. What?

Yes. You are lovely, though.

I thought you were barely an adult.

No, I have been working for the capitol and Aksalla for two decades and a bit after I finished my secondary education.

Veru blinked. Well, then, ma am. We have a place for you to rest until you are able to assist again.

Great. They pulled me out of a solid sleep to come here.

The woman took her hand and pulled her along. Litha's mind was spinning. She had been touched more in the last hour than she had in the last year. It was nice. She hadn't been dangerous to others in casual settings for twenty years, but those who read her early files hadn't let her forget the early days... and that she had killed her parents. She had watched the radiation exposure and its effects, and her parents never blamed her.

She smiled and just enjoyed human contact. She had forgotten how touchy the ladies were. She hadn't been casually touched since she was thirteen.

This way. It is a new building, so you won't have issues with any previous articles left behind.

Anywhere to just rest for a while. I have a place way out of town where I rejuvenate myself. It is helpful for my mental outlook.

Oh. Good. There is some food and a bed and water and a bathroom. Is that enough?

That is fine.

They were walking to a low circular building that looked adorable to Litha. When they were inside, the room was sparse, and everything was visible except for a small cupboard-styled protrusion that had to be the restroom.

This will be fine. Thank you, Veru.

No problem. It is exciting to get that region back. Thank you for helping us. She paused. Why did you?

Because a friend's husband asked. No one asks anymore. Everyone just assumes I do other things, like work.

Oh. Well, I will leave you to your rest.

It could take twelve hours. I am still working off the exertion from the dead zone.

Veru nodded. I understand. No one will disturb you.

Thank you. Good night. She looked out the window. Day. Erm. Whatever.

See you when you rise.

Thank you.

Litha walked to the bed and sank into the blankets and pillows. It was so fluffy.

She settled and kept her suit on but was out in under a minute.

There was nothing like being away from the demands of home like being in a strange yurt in the middle of nowhere.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:31 am

It was music that woke her. She got up, had some bread and cheese, sipped some water, and made a sandwich of smoked meat and more cheese. She left her little house with the sandwich and water.

The music was classical and a challenging piece. Litha wandered in the direction of the music and found a teenager dancing in an open shed with a wooden floor. A few people were watching, and Litha joined them while eating her breakfast. The young woman was good. Very good.

Litha finished her meal and drank her water. When it was gone, she just enjoyed the practice.

When the dancer took a break, the instructor came in, yelling at the girl in Erradian. Litha frowned. She caught some of it, and she was calling her sloppy and lazy. When the instructor waved her arm toward the crowd, Litha heard, Even that cow could do better.

Litha smiled and slowly spoke in Erradian. Challenge accepted.

The instructor paled. Madame, I didn't mean to insult you.

No problem. Let's see if this cow could do better. She stepped forward and turned to the young girl. A duet, or do you want to watch?

I would like to watch, miss.

Okay. The instructor was nervous, but she started the playback.

Litha lifted her hand, let her arms float away from her body, and danced. Quick, slow, en pointe, she moved through the spritely music, and then, she folded back into fifth position. The cow is rusty, so what corrections would you advise?

Your movements are stiff, but I suspect that is the suit.

Correct. Armour plates.

The instructor shrugged. You need to keep dancing.

No longer an option, but thank you. I am too old and bitter. She smiled. Maybe I should become an instructor.

The woman laughed, and her softly pleated features flashed. She said, This one is auditioning in the capitol. Will you give her some tips?

Litha looked at the young woman, her hair scraped back into a bun. Her slim body in the leotard and tutu. The pointe shoes were well-worn and probably needed replacing. Not everyone could have a version built into their suit.

They went through her practice again. Slowly. The girl asked, Where did you dance?

I was prima ballerina at the capitol for five years, and my name was everywhere, but I had to use a projector for my face. Five years later, I had to get into defending, and that was it for the pointe shoes.

The girl blinked. Oh. That was before I was born.

Litha laughed. I know. Now, try the jump again, but imagine landing on a daisy and balancing.

They went through combinations until the girl was grinning but exhausted. You are worse than madame but so soft-spoken.

You don't need to shout to be heard. You just have to show folks that not listening to you is worse than the alternative.

The girl smiled and nodded. I think I am done, and Petrov is watching us.

Oh. Shoot. The reason I am here. Forgot. Keep practicing until slow becomes perfect and perfect is natural.

The girl grinned. Thank you for this.

Thank you for letting me dip a toe in the past. She hugged the girl and walked over to Petrov.

He stared at her. You are a dancer.

No. Not anymore. Not for fifteen years. She smiled. So, shall we go crack into that cylinder?

Yes, I suppose. We are trying to make sure that there aren't any destructive materials in there that will detonate if we open it. Can you deal with that if it happens?

It's the reason I brought the suit. I can eat the power and take it up to dispose of it the way I did the last run. She looked at him. Do you want a lift again?

Please.

She stepped behind them, elevated, and caught him under the arms before flying them back to the devastation and charred soil.

They flew over a bank of farm equipment and semis full of straw and manure. They were staged and waiting. No pressure.

She flew to the object and set Petrov down. What do you want me to do?

Can you break it open?

Yes. I would rather cut it, though. You might want to step back for that.

Of course. May I record you?

Sure. My suit is wired with monitors, so a bunch of those will be recording. I can send a feed wherever you want before we get started.

Petrov smiled. Well then, may I get your com link?

She snorted and held out her wrist. He tried to connect, and she acknowledged it. Then, she brought up her display and sent her suit feeds.

He nodded and said, I look good from this angle.

He looked good from any angle. He was a prince from the fairy tales. Dark hair and pretty eyes. The wide shoulders were nice, the waist looked like he had his own dance training, and his trousers didn't show her what his butt or legs looked like. The boots were nice.

She nodded and looked at the canister. Right. You get back. I am going to take this apart carefully.

He nodded and stepped back.

Litha looked at the canister, tilted her head, then crouched, and began to use her plasma to cut a gap in the side of the metal as she struggled to split it in half.

She cut centimetre after centimetre until she got to the top. The hole she had burned was an inch wide, and she sat back as she tried to peer into the darkness within.

When the fingers shot out and curled against the smouldering edge, she screamed, There s someone in there!

Can you get them out?

I need water. Lots of it.

Petrov started talking into his com and said, They are coming. There are water actives in the trucks.

She looked at the fingers as both hands tried to shove the metal apart. Can you go get them? And a healer. We need someone good with burns.

He nodded and disappeared in a green swirl.

Litha put her fingers over the ones clawing at the inside of the vessel. She spoke Erradian and Aksallan and Common, saying, It will be fine; we are getting you out. We don t want to hurt you, so we are getting help. I don t want to burn you.

His fingers didn t stop grasping at hers, so she tried one last thing. Warrior, you have survived this long. Let us get you free. The world is bright, and you will be in the open air soon.

He stilled. She looked into the darkness, and suddenly, she saw a bronzed cheek pressing against the seam. A black eye full of stars was staring at her.

The voice was hoarse and slow. I. Will. Be. Free? The words were Erradian.

You will be free.

Men in work clothing were brought to her, and she looked at them. Water or healing?

Both men raised their hands. Water.

Can you do a spray?

We can.

She looked the person in the eye. We've got this, but the water will enter the container. I have cut it to the ground, so the water will drain out. You will get wet; you will not drown. We are getting you out.

She looked at the guys. Spray as I cut.

They nodded, and she noticed that one had a tanker on their back. Water was water as long as it lasted.

She cut along the base, getting soaked in the cooling spray. She cut up on the opposite side, hopped on the top, and kept talking to the inhabitant, who was still alive after ten years covered with radiation in an open field. Whatever was inside was tough, and the Uraddans hadn't wanted it.

Litha finished the last cut, and the metal rang. She sat on the canister, put her heels in the seam, and pushed. The metal fell away and clanged heavily to the ground, and Petrov gasped. Midnight!

Litha looked down, and there was a tall but very thin male looking up at her. She

floated to the ground and looked at him, keeping her gaze on his head. He was extremely naked.

She smiled. So, you have been around here for a while?

The midnight eyes looked at her, and he stepped out of the container, grabbing her in a hug. Thank you, miss. Thank you for coming for me.

She quickly babbled. Thank Dmitri. He asked me to clean up the radiation and look at what was in the middle of it. Just like a chocolate box.

He let out a sob and pressed his face into her neck. He whispered thanks in all of the languages she had used.

Petrov said, I can take him.

She was busy soothing the man whose wasted body was wrapped around hers. You might have to take us both. He's a stage four clinger.

Petrov approached cautiously. Midnight, are you ready?

The man clinging to her nodded. Petrov wrapped his arms around them as far as he could, and the world turned to green mist.

Litha was standing in a lab with the man wrapped around her with his mouth against her neck. Petrov was talking to the man named Midnight, and he slowly raised his head and looked around him.

I am home?

The oldest man in a lab coat smiled. Yes, General. You are home.

Dr. Voslov! The voice rumbled through Litha in uncomfortable ways. She tried to pry herself away, but she was stuck.

Midnight held her tight as he stood and looked at the surrounding men. I am really home? This isn't a dream?

Litha smirked against his chest and stomped on his foot. His attention snapped down to her, and she looked up. You can have this discussion without me. And have something to eat. You are scrawny.

He stared down at her. I thought they brought you to me to entice me out.

No. I had to neutralize the radiation and crack your cell. Job done. I have been promised a party. Gotta go. She tried to pull away, but he held on.

She looked up at him. Look, clothes give a lot more coverage than I do. You are with your people; you will be great with some food and a bath.

Petrov said, Dmitri is on his honeymoon but will be here shortly.

Midnight blinked. Crowd got married? Who was dumb enough to fall for him?

Nelith's voice sounded amused. The Blade of Uradda. Don't worry, I have atoned to your government.

Midnight paused, and his grip relaxed. Litha stepped away, and Dmitri rushed in to hug what was obviously his friend.

Dmitri had tears in his eyes as he hugged his friend, and Litha smiled at Nelith. Sorry to interrupt your honeymoon.

The Crowd doesn't like all that sunshine anyway. It's more fun to cuddle under covers. Nelith paused. Are you okay?

Yeah. If Petrov is willing, I will have my fun dinner at the village and then head home.

Petrov was startled into motion. Yes, of course. I am just stunned. He's been missing for twelve years.

Petrov wrapped his arms around her, and they disappeared in a puff of green. She could have sworn she heard a shout, but they disappeared.

* * * *

Nelith watched the man shout in panic, No!

Dmitri held him. It's fine. We only borrowed her to open what turned out to be your prison. She lives in Aksalla.

The man growled. Nephew, who is she?

Litha. She's a textile designer and a retired hero.

Nelith approached slowly. She's also a nova class active.

The man looked at her. You know her?

Yes. We are friends.

Tell me everything.

Put on some pants. Dmitri grinned.

The man growled and stalked over to where one of the lab techs had a set of cotton pants for him in black. He slid the matching open shirt on, and Nelith blinked. Oh, dear. General Midnight.

He growled. Sergei. My name is Sergei.

Nelith closed her eyes and tried to remember his stats and settings. She opened her eyes, and he was in front of her.

You are the Blade of Uradda?

I was, but I escaped, and Uradda has fallen. The actives have found refuge in a number of countries, and the thrashing serpent has no help rising.

He blinked. Were many dead?

More on their side than ours, but it was a multipronged effort. We tore their structures and organizations apart. There are still several key actives missing, but it was quite a blow.

Sergei nodded. And you are in love with Dmitri?

She wrinkled her nose. I wasn't at first, but he wasn't afraid of me, so that wore me down.

Dmitri chuckled. I am too dumb to be discouraged. And the Crowd insisted. I came around when she stopped looking like a child.

Nelith snorted and explained. My growth had been stunted by starvation and torture. I

was given accelerated healing, and it kicked in, so now, I am almost normal-sized for my family.

Dmitri murmured, I don't suppose you have any of that with you, do you?

No, but I can go with you to get some. I just have to contact Khytten and see what she can do. What is the desired effect?

Sergei up to full strength and power.

Nelith shook her head. Not until we have a full scan that I can show to the doctor or Khytten, at the least.

He sighed and looked at his friend. Will you let the researchers scan you?

Sergei nodded. Yes, but handheld units only. No enclosures.

The team looked at each other and nodded. Of course, General.

Nelith sent a text to Khytten and blinked when she saw the before picture projected up on the wall for comparison. Whoa.

Dmitri snorted and lifted her hand to kiss the wedding ring. Too late; you are mine. He could have any woman in several countries and often did.

That isn't the flex you think it is.

He shrugged. I have you under my spell, which takes the effort of subduing ten women on a nightly basis.

Is that flattery?

Is it working?

She laughed and smacked him.

Sergei turned his head to look at them and shook his head with a slight smile.

Nelith got a ping from Khytten, and a reaper walked out of the shadows, handed her a stack of vials, and then Denier winked and returned to the shadows.

Dmitri paused. Did he have an Anubis head?

Yes, he did.

You know him.

Yes, I do. She smiled. You will, too. He's uncle to the grandchildren.

Oh. Wow. Fair enough. Should we have invited them to the wedding?

No, the triplets are too small.

Right. He hugged her as they watched Sergei getting a physical.

He had been scanned, and it was determined he had lost a hundred twenty pounds of muscle over his incarceration.

Nelith looked at him. I am surprised he isn't squirrely by now. That is a long time to be alone.

He stares into the void of space when he is using his activation. I believe that he slept for much of it.

He is your friend?

Friend and uncle.

Father's or mother's side?

Mother's.

That explains why he is so pretty.

Dmitri wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. Don't mention that. It is exceptionally annoying.

To him?

To me.

She laughed softly, and Sergei smiled. He had more scans to get through, and then, they would give him Khytten's vials.

* * * *

The trucks rolled the moment the government extracted the canister, and the village was excited that the plowing would soon begin the process of mixing the mediums into a proto soil.

Six hours after she had left the lab, the party was underway.

The amount of dumplings offered to her was astonishing. She added sour cream, jam, and sautéed onions as well as pickled shredded cabbage.

She smiled as the locals explained the details of the area and what a hardship it had been with the dead zone so close. She ate and nodded, and Petrov translated the older language from the elders. It was a little harder to understand as several folks were teeth-optional.

Veru sat next to Litha and asked, Having fun?

This is lovely. Thank you.

Did you really find Midnight in the canister?

Yes.

Veru looked around. How badly was he decomposed?

He wasn't. He's alive, and he's at the lab getting a going over. Dmitri and Nelith are with him, so he's in good hands. She shoved another dumpling into her mouth.

Their hands were fine. Do you know someone named Kitten? The low, soft voice spoke, and Litha winced. Her chipmunk cheeks were impossible to hide.

She looked at him, and he crouched next to her and laughed. He reached out, wiped the sour cream off her lips, and then cleaned his thumb off with his tongue.

Veru exhaled slowly. General Midnight.

He turned to her, his stellar eyes sparkling. Hello, miss.

Veru. She is the wife of the head guy here.

Veru was spellbound. Her eyes sparkled, and there was a flush in the exposed

cleavage of her blouse.

Litha chewed and swallowed. Does that happen a lot?

Midnight looked back at her and smiled. Sadly, yes. It was fun when I was younger but wore my nerves out.

Understandable. Khytten. Oh. That explains why you look better now.

Not so scrawny?

She winced. I did say something to that effect, but since I was plastered to you, you were really bony. Sorry. She looked at him. But now, you are much improved. Congratulations.

She didn't say that he looked edible in the open tunic, loose trousers, and the leather boots that the other men were wearing. He was crouched near her and started to snag stuff off her plate. He looked surprised when a fork embedded itself in the back of his hand.

He paused and removed her fork, returning it to her. Did it slip?

Did your hand? I am an active, and I don't fuck around with food.

He blinked and shook his head. His black hair was bound in a slick tail. It was long but not as long as one would expect for a ten-year incarceration.

He grinned. Your Erradian manners are lacking.

I live in Aksalla. It isn't an issue. I am also wearing armour to a party. So... all kinds of wrong etiquette. She forked up some of the pickled cabbage and winced.

What does your spouse do?

Well, when I was five, it was a pony; when I was nine, it was a singer in a boy band, then another pony, and when I was fourteen, it was the hero teams and then... nothing.

He was frowning.

Oh, you didn't mean in my imagination. Right. No idea what he does or even if he's real somewhere in the world. She used her tongue to go looking for the remainder of the zingy cabbage. So, when do you start therapy?

What?

For being trapped in a canister for a decade.

I will work it out.

Wow. Your funeral. They made me do all kinds of crap, but now, I am homicidal and not suicidal, so that's nice.

He chuckled and then looked at her. Oh, you are serious.

Oh, yes. My patience is this big. She held her finger and thumb touching. Glad you found some pants.

He chuckled. See? I knew you were looking. He grabbed another dumpling, and she stabbed her fork right next to his hand. You missed.

Did I? The target was so tiny.

He paused, his eyes widened, and then, he started laughing.

Litha kept eating and sighed. It wasn't. It had rivalled one of the sausages on the platter near her. It was not a small sausage.

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Litha enjoyed her food and then amused herself by lighting a tray of extreme-proof alcohol with the flick of a finger.

They offered her one, and she took it, blowing the flame out as a lesson to others before she tossed the shot back. She fought the face she wanted to make, but when she grimaced, the men and women watching laughed.

When her head burst into blue flame, everyone gasped. Litha waited until the alcohol burned off and said, I don't get along with spirits.

Midnight leaned back. So I see. Not a big drinker?

Not unless I want to start a forest fire or signal aircraft. Litha sighed and killed the last of the dumplings on her plate. Whew. That was a good meal.

Midnight settled next to her, and a plate was brought to him. They were sitting in front of most of the items, and he started loading the plate.

He had a mound of food that put hers to shame. He set it between them and started eating, forgoing the fork.

So, what do you do in Aksalla?

Textile creator for actives. I have a degree in chemical engineering and a fondness for fabric.

Interesting. You made the fabric you are wearing?

Yes. That was the reason for my intellectual pursuit. I was tired of ending up naked.

He smiled. Worse for you than for me.

Sure. I don't have waves of swooning members of the opposite sex who have all applied blush and lipstick since you arrived. All cleavage is a few inches higher as well. I am guessing that you get around.

My blood runs hot.

Yeah, I can understand that.

You can?

Sure. I even signed up for the BDC, but all they were able to find for me was a series of tepid dates that just left me frustrated.

He cut off foreplay?

We didn't even hold hands. Everybody there thinks I am going to dose them with radiation. So, I quit and am thinking about quitting my job and retiring to irradiate plants or something. Sorry. I am in a mood.

Enforced celibacy can do that.

That is what the BDC is all about, but they won't pair actives with those that can cause them harm, and what it comes down to is no one trusts me. I didn't have enough funds to become a patron.

Patron?

They are the ones who pay for the dates with the escorts. The funds are used to seek out more and more escorts as they have had a recent tendency to end up in unions, which makes them ineligible to continue in the company.

Interesting. The women survive?

The women are all actives, so... yeah.

His eyes widened as he ate. All of them?

Yup. And preferences are stated in an extensive application, and after some investigation, if folks are accepted, they are very pleased with the services.

Wait, they can reject an applicant?

Sure, if they are too dangerous or violent or want to rut their way through the actives and cause injury. All of those.

And what are the rates?

That depends on what they want to do and to what extent. There are platonic dates or days of bookings. Some even take their favourite escorts to the resort that the corporation owns.

And no one is entangled?

No one is in a registered partnership. That is a huge deal.

She started to pick over his plate and got some slices of smoked meat. She saw his mouth curve in a smile. She mumbled. Wha?

He chuckled. In Erradia, we don't have anything as advanced as an organized corporation for meeting others. It is all trial and error.

She nodded. Well, it must work occasionally. Was your mother an active?

She was a minor active. I was her only child. I was not my father's only child. He had six with six different women.

Litha grimaced. Ick. How many of the women survived the pregnancy?

He looked at her. How did you know?

It's common. The energy of an active wears on the mother, and then the child drains what is left. All life force is pushed into the baby, and it leaves little for the mother. She shrugged. With active women, they have the energy to spare, so more kids. Lots more kids.

How many kids?

She smiled. The current winner is Khytten with a set of triplets and adopted twins. Nelith has been given the title of grandma considering her age.

Five children with one woman? That sort of thing is uncommon.

Yeah, but in most countries, so is screwing your way to a sports team.

He blinked. Right. I suppose not.

How many kids do you have? She was curious.

What?

How many children do you have?

None that I am aware of. I am sure the government would know. Any claims are investigated.

Oh, right.

She nibbled at some of the sliced sausage and then reached for some bread and stacked it. You recovered quickly, Midnight.

Sergei. My name is Sergei.

Okay.

Say it.

Asshole. She stated.

He paused. What?

You gave me an order, and I am far too old for orders.

Sergei stared at her. You think you are old?

I know I am older than most bed bunnies you have been entertaining and most who fawn at you. I am old enough to know that I am past the age of listening to what anyone tells me to do unless I already want to do it.

When did you activate?

Fourteen.

He nodded. You are angry about it?

I hate it. Sure, it has given, but it has also taken far more.

That much I understand. In males, power is encouraged and dealt with with ease. For women, it is like it isn't the same energy, the same methods of control, and the same means of motivation.

Yeah, they tried to give me all the occupations I wanted, but nothing was enough. It took me years before I figured out why. Active drive. After that, my life was hell. She sipped at the strong, sweet mint tea she had been served. But hey. It could have been worse.

He chuckled. I am glad that I can be a cautionary tale.

Music started up, and he grinned. And now the dancing. I hope you are not in a hurry.

She smiled. I can just keep eating.

Her little ballerina friend from the morning was there wearing traditional dress of boots, a long skirt, and an embroidered blouse. The headdress was flowers with ribbons hanging low, and she looked adorable.

She was standing tall, and as the music started, she began a cute hopping step that had her swaying from side to side. Other young women joined, and they danced in patterns that were familiar to everyone watching except Litha. When the men joined, it made her smile, and she watched the very decorous moves happen with minimal contact between the sexes.

Warm breath across her cheek heralded the question. Enjoying the dancing?

I always do.

He chuckled and turned her head to face him. He met her gaze, and she stared at him, blinking slowly.

The music changed, and she whipped her chin off his light grip to turn back to the dancers.

He mused, I don't hypnotize you.

Nope.

He chuckled. That is a novelty.

She felt the tiny part of her that had been warming to what she guessed was flirting go cold.

The next few hours went by, and she watched the dancers, listened to the music, ate some pastry, and had copious amounts of tea.

When the chief came up to her with a wary look at Sergei, he bowed. Madame Litha, thank you for coming to our aid and clearing the radiation from the site. Our people have had their farmland restored to their care, and we would like to invite you back when the first harvest is collected.

She smiled. I will be happy to return.

The ballerina had a flat item pressed to her. Ma'am? I asked my teacher, and she went through her magazines, and we found you. Would you sign this, please?

The girl shoved the cover toward her, and she caught it with the pen. Litha looked at

the image of her when she was strong, hopeful, and dressed in floaty, silky chiffon. They had asked her to repeat the pose, so she had. She looked like she was doing the splits in midair.

There was a strangled voice from next to her. You are in ballet?

Not anymore. For them, the novelty of an active prima wore off, and I was quietly retired by the troupe. After that, it was back to school to finish my master s, and then, I started working in the lab. She signed it and handed it back to the girl. It isn t worth anything, but I am happy you asked.

The girl clutched it to her chest. Madame says that you have helped me more in a few hours than she does in days. It took a lot for her to say that.

It did. It might not last, but you had a different viewpoint for a few moments, just as you will if you go to the city. The teachers there will be brutal, but I wanted you to know that calm teaching is still teaching.

The girl smiled. Slow until it s under control, and then, speed it up.

Yup. Well, on that note, I will take my leave.

The young woman blinked. You aren t staying overnight? She flicked a glance at Midnight.

No. I haven t been drinking, my exertions weren t tiring, and I have to untangle my life and figure out which strands I want to keep.

The girl nodded. Thank you so much. It means so much to us that the fields are returned to neutral.

This is farming country. That makes total sense. I will say goodbye to a few people, and then, I am gone.

She got off her seat and walked around to hug the young woman. The others figured out what was going on, and with a few looks at Sergei and her, she was hugged by every woman in the village and shook the hands of most of the men. That was tiring, but she smiled, walked into a clear area, and took off.

She showed off a little and let her aura blaze white-hot around her before she turned and headed home.

* * * *

Sergei watched the one sure thing in his universe fly away.

She doesn't associate with people. She doesn't touch people. More to the point, no one touches her, Petrov spoke quietly.

She doesn't react to me. I have been trying to pull at her all night, and she doesn't react to me. Sergei looked at him.

She does, but she is reacting like a young woman, all diversion and blushes, but she has an adult mind and doesn't blush. Petrov shrugged. I have to visit her to see if I can get some of her radiation-resistant plants, as well as the radiation-consuming ones.

When?

We need to figure out a budget. We already have a test site.

Midnight stopped frowning. You are going to speak with her? You can contact her?

I can. You can t?

We did not discuss that. I was attempting to seduce her, but she didn t notice.

Female actives are not trained in how to seek out sexual partners. They are neutralized for reproduction and basically left on their own unless they are omegas. Then, they are given as much training as possible.

Sergei nodded. Strange. Well, I suppose I should meet with any governing bodies that want to hear what happened, and then, I will try seeking out therapy. Do we have therapists?

After the Uraddan wars, we obtained them. Petrov sighed. They became necessary for some who had survived capture and torture. I believe you qualify.

Sergei remembered his energy filling the inside of the capsule over and over. The only light in his existence was his own power until the moment that heat had opened the capsule, and he had seen daylight for the first time in years.

He had thrust his fingers out, eager to feel air, rain, wind, or sun. Then he felt the soft touch and heard the voice telling him they were getting him out. He would be free. He listened to it as it cycled through several languages. It took a lot for him to speak, but he finally replied. She had been calling orders for what was needed, and his hands were burned, but he relished the change. His first feeling was pain, and the second was her hand.

She talked to him the whole time she was cutting him out with even swipes of her deadly hands. The water had trickled in, and she had left the top seam for last so he wouldn t get soaked.

He could not have dreamed her. His dreams of women used to be seduction and soft

hands. She was moving like a mechanic crossed with a spider monkey.

When she pried him free, he had looked for anything solid, and she would do. When he had dropped onto her, she smelled amazing. Warm and female and sweaty. When she held him and stroked him to calm him, he shuddered and began to sob, using her neck as an anchor point. She tasted as sweet as she smelled.

The armoured panels in her suit had thwarted him, but she was slim and had strength in her. His constant hunger had woken in the moments that they were in contact, but it was different. Perhaps it was tempered by the time he had spent in the canister.

He needed to work through this and fast. He wanted to find out if his hunger had changed or if it was gone entirely. It seemed to have settled the moment Litha left in a blaze of light.

Petrov cleared his throat. I have found a few local women who will accommodate you.

It isn't necessary. I don't require it yet.

Petrov paused. You are serious?

I am serious.

Well then, would you like to return to the base and complete your deposition?

Sergei nodded. I will meet you there.

He thanked his hosts, backed away, and let the energy inside him flash to cover every inch of him. He knew they were looking at a body filled with a gateway to a dimension with different stars, but they were respectful, even if the women looked at

him lustfully. He wasn't reciprocating for the first time that he could remember.

There was a flick of concentration, and he was back at the base he had left so many years earlier. There were a few government representatives there, and he nodded and let the questions begin.

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Litha woke up, had some coffee, and started to putter around her tiny farm. The seasons were changing, and it was time to get the seeds in the ground or, at least, in the barn.

She hummed and puttered around from dawn until noon and then wandered back to have lunch. She took her sandwich out to the porch and sat out there, looking at the sealed barn that seemed to be mocking her.

She finished her sandwich and some iced tea, and with a deep breath, she crossed her yard and went to the barn. She opened the locks, one after the other, lifted the crossbar, and set it aside. She opened both doors and let the light in. The floors were dusty, and the barre was ready. The mirrors were covered with cloth, and she smiled at the serene aura of waiting that her studio had. She bit her lip and debated whether or not to do what she was about to do, and then, she grinned. Time to get back to the barre.

She was sweating but happy when she finished. She could have done most of the work with a light wave of heat, but it would have damaged the wood.

Now that her studio was ready, she needed some new pointe shoes. Her old ones had disintegrated.

She checked the time and saw nineteen messages. Shrugging, she took off and headed for the shoe shop. They were still open, and she still had time.

The fitter had wanted her to try on more than one shoe, but time was limited, so she bought the three pairs he had in mind and headed home again.

While her dinner heated, she sat and sewed the elastic onto her shoes. She wasn't performing, so she didn't need to break them in much.

She was happy. She had forgotten how much just the routine of preparing the room and the shoes made her happy. It was a forgotten joy, and she was reclaiming it.

She put on her shoes, started the music, and began a slow warm-up.

It turned out to be a really good night.

There was a knock on the door to the barn. Litha slowly completed her movements then turned and walked over. Hey, Kritz. Hey, Arcady.

Arcady was standing in the doorway and staring. You are a ballerina?

I was.

Kritz came forward and said, You are in a better frame of mind.

Dancing always lifts my spirits. I had forgotten how much it helps actually to move my body.

She took a towel from a hanger and blotted at her neck and cleavage. She looked at Kritz. What's up?

We have an active with a containment issue. She says she knows you.

Litha blinked. What's her name?

She calls herself Feral.

Litha paused. I will just shower and change. There is iced tea in the fridge.

She took off her shoes, put on her fluffy boots, and walked back to the house. Arcady followed and asked, Wait, so you really do that?

Yes. I used to do it for a living.

Wow. I have been to the ballet a few times with Kritz, and it always made me want to learn. I love the shoes.

The shoes come after your training when your ankles and feet are strong enough. Those who try it early end up injuring themselves. She entered the house and walked straight to the shower, hanging her shoes up on their peg on the way.

The shower was quick, and since her hair was already rock solid, she was ready after a quick rinse. She grabbed one of the water bottles she stashed in the house and walked to her bedroom, drying by heating her skin.

She dressed quickly and kept drinking as she slapped a sandwich together and pressed it between her palms. Heating it into a grilled cheese in seconds.

When ready, she looked to a stunned Arcady, who muttered, I didn't know you could do that.

Litha smiled. I have been in complete control of my activation for twenty years. You think I can't make a sandwich? She took a bite.

No, I just... they said you leaked radiation.

When I was fourteen. I did that when I was fourteen. I have been in control as long as you have been alive, Arcady.

But, the BDC register-

Went off the initial training scans and considered it too dangerous to test me again. She shrugged, ate her sandwich with quick bites, and washed her hands. Kritz had come in and was looking around her home with wonder. It s a farmhouse.

Yeah. It was my grandparents . It s why it was so easy to get me to Aksalla.

Kritz stared. I didn t know that either.

She chuckled. I have been around, and most of my history is concealed from the public or active searches. It has to do with me being a public disaster as a minor. There was a public outcry, and the courts urged them to free my parents and pardon them for their actions. But, despite that, they remained incarcerated until I first took to the sky to mitigate the effect of a meteor shower. There wasn t a stellar guard then, so I just went up and did what I do.

Arcady s eyes were wide. Whoa.

Kritz nodded. Yes, what she said.

Right, should I follow you to the lab?

Arcady paused. Feral isn t at the lab. She s at the detention centre.

Litha s eyes went white-hot. Right. Out of my way.

She left her home and burned through the sky until she saw the detention centre.

The defenses trained on her, and she landed at the edge of the safe zone and stalked toward the high gates.

Halt. Stop. Be identified.

Dr. Litha. Here to see Feral. Open the gates or lose them.

She isn't cleared for visitation.

She powered up, and the gates began to buckle. Lose them it is.

Wait!

Torun dropped near her. Wait. Open the gates.

Vikor pulled up with Drin and got out of his car before he could let her out. Drin said, Litha. Let them open the gates. Let Vikor go first.

Drin paused, and Torun didn't touch her, but he stayed close. Drin walked around to face her. You were just going to walk in?

Sure. Energy weapons can't hurt me. My friend is in there, and she needs to talk to me. I would do the same thing for you or Zera, Drin.

Drin blinked, and her elfin features looked sweet. Really?

Don't worry. Unlike everyone else around you, I don't want to see you naked.

Drin chuckled. Thanks for that.

Someone has to keep you humble.

Are you radioactive right now?

No. Just irritated. It s standard heat right now. I just have a lot of it. She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked at Torun. He was blinking at his hand.

Huh. I always thought my hand would turn black if I touched you.

Missed your chance. She sneered. Coward.

He blinked, and his cheeks darkened. I still could request you.

Nope. I resigned. I am now living a life of solitude and withering like the old maid I am.

Vikor came out and waved her in. Litha only.

Litha stepped forward and walked through the gates and into the detention centre. Vikor murmured, They have her in the holding area as she hasn t been charged yet. She s in rough shape.

Yeah, she has to be if she s here.

They walked past the guards who had weapons drawn. Litha rolled her eyes. She hadn t been shot since she was fifteen. Her body melted any projectile that hit it.

She offered herself for a pat down, and the officer declined. Ma am, will you go through the scanner?

She stood in the scanner and then passed into the next section, where cells were lined up. She ran to Feral s scent and opened the door.

Vikor sighed. Was it open?

It was for me.

Feral sat there with her scaled tail no longer in evidence. Her skin and scales were patchy, and her claws were snapped and broken.

Oh, honey bunny. Litha sat with her, and Feral leaned against her and started to cry.

Feral sniffled, and she groaned. Litha checked the heat signatures of Feral's body, and she hissed. She opened her com. Zera. I have a badly injured active female in heat who needs immediate medical attention. She is in the detention centre, and I am not leaving her side.

Zera blinked. Oh, shit. Torun thought you were going berserk. She's an omega?

She is. She's one of Xeva's kin.

Fuck. I am pushing the paperwork through. Stay with her.

I am. I am going to start listing her breaks while you type.

Right. Go.

Wrist, forearm, ankle, three ribs, three fingers, two vertebrae, and her orbital socket on her left side. She dragged in a deep breath. Collapsed lung, internal bleeding, a chunk of her scalp missing, and burn damage to about thirty percent of her dermis.

Shit. Why didn't they get that on intake?

Feral has an electrical interference projection that makes seeing her on scans difficult. I just looked for hot spots.

Oh. The prefect has the request, and I am also sending it to Khytten as Grandma is visiting the triplets and twins right now. Zera sighed and then perked up. Khytten has seen it.

Litha stroked Feral's head. The killings she is accused of are for Urradan war criminals who escaped the purge. She suffered more at their hands than most.

Feral was still crying, but now, she was sniffling and pressing her head to Litha.

Zera paused, Is she touching your skin?

Yes. I haven't been a contact radioactive in about twenty years.

But, your file said-

I know. After I was a teenager, they stopped scanning me. I broke the equipment because I didn't like it, and I was already grieving my parents. She muttered, It was really the wrong time to try giving me a pap smear.

Zera stared. That was... oh, my god. So, you are perfectly safe for contact?

Yes. I tried to tell you when I applied to the BDC. Stop looking so surprised, Vikor.

Fuck. I am sorry. We do sweeps of your office when you aren't there, but they are always clean. Zera paused. Right. The prefect is sending the medical release order. We will keep her until a hearing can be arranged. Medical is standing by.

Feral clutched at Litha. She's a little wary of medics, so I will be with her the entire time.

Understood. Okay, they will be with you soon.

Litha stroked Feral's head. It's okay, honey bunny. We've got this.

They waited for ten minutes, and then, a group of guards came toward them. We will escort you out.

Litha smiled. I've got you, bunny.

She lifted her friend carefully, but the panting and distress were still there. Vikor said, I can take her.

I have her, and her limbs are as supported as they are going to get. When we are free of this place, I will fly directly to Z-Tech.

Right. Why did I forget you can fly?

Litha muttered, Because you think I live in my office.

He chuckled. So, what is going on with you? Drin said you are avoiding the office.

Just working through some things. My plans fell through, and I am having to pivot.

I see.

She chuckled as she passed through the checkpoints as a bunch of law enforcement glared at her. She looked at what seemed to be the man in charge. After she is getting medical treatment, I can come back, and we can discuss my decorum while my friend gets her life-threatening injuries treated.

The guard looked at her, and she let her eyes flare white. Look me up, junior. I have saved this world half a dozen times and only endangered this facility once.

Feral chuckled weakly, and the guard shook his head. Not necessary, ma'am.

They got past the front desk, and Vikor went to Drin while Torun nodded to Litha. Kritz sent his vehicle home. She walked outside the distance marker and took off, flying carefully with her friend in her arms.

The medical team gently took custody of her, and Kritz was waiting and said, We will take care of her.

Feral muttered, Don't leave me.

I won't. I will be within shouting distance. Promise, but they don't need me there freaking them out.

Litha walked with them, gave Kritz Feral's medical history, and explained that while she was a candidate for Kritz's creepy nanites, she couldn't use Khytten's contribution. She violently reacted to certain things, and people milk was one of them.

Kritz nodded, and Arcady made notes as they went down to the medical lab. They got a fluid line in, and Litha mentioned that Feral had difficulty with painkillers. They won't hurt her, but you have to use enough for someone four hundred pounds.

Kritz blinked. Right. We will turn it up slowly until she's comfortable.

Good. Watch her vitals. She will lie and say she's fine.

Feral chuckled. You are telling all my secrets.

No secrets when you only have one lung working.

The wheezing was still there, but Feral didn't seem to notice it. As they started to move through the checkpoints, Litha kept an eye on her friend's features.

They got to the lab, and Litha stood back as she watched the hive of action around her friend.

When they relieved the pressure by piercing tissue between the ribs, Feral dragged in a wet breath and started to breathe evenly.

Litha smiled and watched as the pain was slowly relieved, and Arcady came back with a case that Kritz removed an injector from. He pressed it against Feral's side, there was a hiss, and Feral slowly closed her eyes.

Litha spoke. Those nanites will leave or die and be absorbed, right?

Kritz nodded. They are on repair and record right now. What is she?

Multi-shifter with complete control.

She copies things?

She is an at-will shifter. She just has to think of it.

Right. Wow.

Zera arrived and said, Litha, how did you meet her?

She came to me. Damaged and bloody. I wrapped up her paws, got her eating again, and then came in from lunch, and there she was, sitting at my computer. I looked at her, she looked at me, and I saw the marks on her hands and stupidly called her bunny.

Feral chuckled. Litha gives me the cutest names.

Rest, you scaly moron. We are going to ask you about what happened when you wake up.

I got the last one on my list. Filled my Bingo card. She chortled. What's my prize?

Rest.

Zera asked, What is she after?

I told you, Urradan war criminals and torturers who didn't make the lists. Feral is feral for a reason. She was dropped in jungles and set to burrow out of sand to destroy vehicles. She's a one-woman destruction crew if she wants to be. But she also loves gardening and baking.

Feral was slowly relaxing as the treatment took hold.

Litha walked over and used a light wave to clean Feral's front. The medics rolled her to her side, and Litha cleaned all the gnarled whip marks and blade carving and helped settle her on clean sheets.

Now that she was relaxing, the scales were fading, and she looked like herself again. Her hands were messed up, and the tingle of her heavy pheromones in the air made her heat more apparent.

When Feral was out, they moved her from the central lab to a quiet room and settled her into bed, and Litha tucked her in with a sad smile.

You'll be fine, Feral. I am going to go and talk to my coworkers.

She left the room and walked up to Zera.

Where did they find her?

On the road about five kilometres from your home. The peacekeeper took a look at her and hit her with a stunner to drop her. From there, it was a call to detention, and he hauled her in. Do you think he assaulted her?

No, she was attacked by someone else. That is why she tried to get back to my place. She wanted somewhere safe, and I wasn't there.

You are here now, and the detention centre wants you reprimanded.

Litha smiled. For what? I offered them options the entire stretch of the way. I abided by the law. As her legal guardian and requested representation, they had no reason to halt me. Them being scared shitless isn't a legal excuse.

Zera blinked. I have to apologize. I read the initial report, and I thought they were accurate. You were never reassessed?

Nope. Not once.

So, I have fucked up.

My guess is yes.

And this is why you snapped.

Correct. It is one thing to be alone at the farm and another to be alone in a room full of partnerships. You are lucky I didn't snap and torch you all.

Zera blinked. Yes. I am getting that idea. But you have other friends?

Sure. I was friends with Nelith, with Feral, a few others here and there around the world. Xeva's duality was always known to me, as was her frustration after she recovered from that accident. Same with Drin's. No secrets. The heat signature always tells.

What would happen if I copied your skill set?

We would be standing here, and everyone would be dead, and the building would be on fire. I have met a copycat before. Their body wasn't built to handle it, and they didn't have self-control, so spontaneous human combustion, here we come.

Zera nodded. Right.

When will the legal idiots descend?

The government is willing to take a tribunal approach.

Okay. We can work with that. When they want her to speak, we need a projector.

Doable.

Good. Vikor is a good representative. He reminds everyone we are dealing with actives.

Zera nodded. I will keep him on retainer. She paused. Do you think you are going to stay with Z-Tech?

Working from home, perhaps. Drin makes an excellent saleswoman. She needs more acknowledgement of her efforts.

Zera nodded again. I think we can look into something along those lines.

I don't even need to stay here. I can get a place in the islands, on an arctic platform, or work from the moon if I can set up a signal. The world is available to me if I am not trying to maintain relationships. I have realized I can be happy by myself, but I need to stop yanking myself back into socializing.

What if I find a match for you?

I am out of the BDC. It doesn't matter anymore. I was borderline unmatchable, and now, I am off the roster. It's done. I am creeping up on forty, and having a child has been blocked from my level of possibility. I won't beg, and I won't pretend to be less than I am.

Zera nodded. Right. Sorry, I hadn't grasped how frustrating that would be. I thought it would be nice nights at the opera and stuff.

It would have been, but he took the escorts he was sleeping with to the opera. I got picnic after picnic after picnic like he was afraid to be seen with me.

I see. She brought up the after-date reports that Litha had dutifully filled out. There it is. Went out, listened to him talk about other women, and returned to base after a picnic. Too much cilantro in the food.

More like that. Over and over. I don't need the money, but I did need the companionship, and that wasn't being offered, which became more obvious over time.

Right. I haven't fucked a situation up like this before.

Litha smiled. Give yourself time. It will happen again. The universe is filled with

limitless fuckups. There are more destined for you.

Zera blinked. Why do I feel like I just got spanked?

Litha looked at her deadpan. Oh, you know, that feels different.

Zera grinned. Yeah, it does. This is less fun.

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Litha sat at Feral's bedside, idly designing a suit for her. It would stop her from getting flayed open again. She finished her design and sent it off for fabrication.

Feral looked at her. You don't have to stay with me. They gave me an entertainment tablet.

I don't want to miss it if they try and interrogate you or take you into custody.

I feel better, really better. Kritz told me the nanites are done with me, but they would like to record my shifting ability.

Don't worry. They don't torture for it.

Okay. Good to know. I feel a little silly being in bed with people delivering food to me.

This is what a nice vacation feels like, but then, it would be on a beach, like at your sister's place.

Feral sighed. I knew lurking in the trees was a mistake. I should have been lurking in the ocean.

Funny. Well, your heat is under control. How are you feeling?

Better. That guy hit me like a ton of angry limbs, which he had. I had to claw my way through his chest plate to get him off me.

Who was it?

Yaveneski. He went for hard mutation after the fall. He didn't want anyone knowing that he was involved in the med lab. Feral snorted. He was part turtle and part squid. It was an astonishing combo.

I bet. Where's the body?

Oh, I dragged him to a law enforcement outpost, and then, I sort of made a run for it. I was heading to your house to lay low, but I misjudged my shadow walk and ended up getting arrested.

And here we are.

A soft knock at the door made them look. Arcady opened the door and said, Litha, there is someone who needs to speak to you.

Litha smiled at Feral. I will be right back.

Litha stepped outside, and Arcady gestured for her to follow. When they were a safe distance away, Arcady said, The Erradians are here, and they want to borrow you again.

Oh. So?

For a longer period of time, as an emotional support creature.

Litha was startled into laughing. What?

The amount they are offering is astronomical, but apparently, one of their most venerated heroes was returned to them, and he needs emotional support because of

what happened to him at the hands of Uradda.

And I am the first pick? Doubtful. She was glib, but she knew who they were talking about. Arcady walked with her to the lift, and they went up to a boardroom where a serious Zera and the prefect were sitting across from Dmitri and Petrov, as well as some more grizzled representatives. Sergei's aura was in the air, so he must have stepped out for a coffee.

Arcady backed away, and Litha looked at Dmitri. Where is the dumbass?

Dmitri looked shocked and amused at the same time. I beg your pardon?

This is for Sergei, right? Where is the twit?

She smelled soap and Sergei behind her.

He spoke softly. I was using the restroom. How are you, little star?

Confused. Would you like a teddy bear? A dog, maybe? A human is a little much for a comfort object.

Sergei shrugged. It was the government's idea. They wish me calm and not destructive when I wake up fighting for my life, so...here we are.

And you had nothing to do with it.

Petrov raised his hand. I suggested it. He was calm when close to you.

So, Midnight hadn't wanted her. She nodded. Right. Start taking melatonin or something.

He had a strange look in his eyes. You don't want to be with me?

No. I have just figured out what I want to do with my time, and you didn't factor into it. She was defensive and looked at the prefect, who was rubbing her forehead.

Zera's eyes were wide, and she was pale.

Dmitri was grinning in delight, and Petrov looked nauseous.

Sergei touched her cheek and smiled. The only woman on the continent who doesn't want me.

Geez. Is that the problem? Shallow much? Go find one of the bazillion women who is swooning at the thought of you, and get checked frequently for STDs. Litha shook her head.

The prefect sounded strangled. They have offered us rare minerals in exchange for your cooperation until he is recovered from his PTSD.

Oh, so you are trying to sell me, or are you trying to buy me? Either way, I have given enough. I am done trying to people-please and play nice.

Zera said, They will set you up with a lab so you can keep working.

Fine, who will pay me the overtime? If I am watching him all night and then working a full day and probably eating somewhere in there, how long do you think I will last with four hours sleep for an extended period of time? When do I garden, where do I garden, where do I dance, when do I go for walks, when do I have a life?

Zera flinched. Maybe there could be an arrangement where you had somewhere to live while you are there?

The people are very hospitable, but it is nearly planting season at my place, and I would hate to miss it.

Sergei was staring at her, and she felt like he was trying to communicate with her, but she didn't speak that language.

Zera's com sounded an alert. Oh, damn. The ice cream kiosk in the mall just loaded some fresh strawberry.

Litha blinked. No way. Well, I will be back after I snag a care package for Feral. She loves strawberry. Zera, did you want some, too?

Half a litre, please.

Okay. Tootles, folks. Hash this out without me, but I vote there is no reason for me to go there.

Zera paused, and a light came to her eyes. See you when you get back. We will probably be debating when you return.

Litha nodded and wandered out, heading for the most popular ice cream shop in the area.

* * * *

Zera looked at Sergei. What if you moved in with her until you settled?

He blinked. Here? Aksalla would let me reside here for a time?

The prefect perked up. We would as long as you agreed not to use your activation against any member of our citizenry.

He looked around and shrugged. I have no objection. I would like to see what your country has to offer.

She smiled and nodded. In that case, we just have to get Litha to agree to that.

The prefect said, It is far easier to get you here than deal with what has come to light about her.

Zera watched the stunning Sergei settle in his seat. If he weren't marked for Litha, she wouldn't mind taking him for a spin. Sergei looked at her, and there was no intrigue, no attraction in his gaze. He knew she was looking at him as if he was a sweet, but he didn't reciprocate. She rocked back in surprise.

Dmitri chuckled. Every woman he has ever met has flopped over onto their backs when Sergei just asks them for a glass of water.

Sergei shrugged. Except Litha. The drive is there when she is there, and it fades when she's gone. I can't sleep when she's not there.

Zera blinked. What is your activation?

He chuckled. Part of my mind is in the stars, and I can step from place to place or pull the silence of the vacuum out to tear vehicles or buildings apart. My body produces a normally ambient radiation, but I can withhold it from the surrounding area. He smiled. Now, why does Litha resist my efforts to flirt with her?

Zera wrinkled her nose. She doesn't know you are. She wouldn't know a pass if it hit her in the face.

She's an attractive woman. Very attractive. The locals said she was a dancer.

Zera nodded. She was. I have been doing research, and some of the other women who didn't like her position in the company claimed that she was hot or burning when she danced and got some of the males to agree to it. It started the rumour that she was distracted and leaked radiation. That rumour followed her until this week.

So, what of her past lovers.

None. Didn't she say that? She's normally fairly forthright about that sort of thing.

Sergei frowned. You aren't serious. I know she is currently frustrated, but it is a transient state, no?

The prefect shook her head. No. She's forbidden from taking anyone to her bed that hasn't been confirmed radiation-resistant and willing. Everyone knows her reputation for turning opponents to ash, so they are not willing to risk it.

Zera cleared her throat. She is also aware of your, hmm, activities and the draw you have on women, so she is opting out to save herself pain. She's older than the young women who fawn over you and feels it keenly.

How old can she be?

Zera answered, She graduated from university nearly twenty years ago. She was in her twenties.

Sergei grinned. So, closer to my own age than any of the others.

Dmitri muttered, Sergei, you are in your fifties.

I stand by my statement. He looked at the old grizzled man next to him. So, Father, what would you recommend to seduce an angry, deadly virgin?

Zera blinked. That was blunt.

The old general looked around and said, Find another woman.

Zera looked at Sergei, and he looked furious. Dark tendrils started to leak from his eyes. Whoa.

* * * *

Litha had dropped off Feral's ice cream with a spoon first, and then, Feral looked at her. Get upstairs, quickly.

Litha took the hint and went through the locks as fast as she could. She had the ice cream in the melt-proof container that she carried, and when the elevator let her out, she walked to the crowd that was facing the boardroom. Well, it had been the boardroom. Now, it was space.

Get the hell out of here. I will handle this. Check on it again in five minutes or not, but I am powering up.

Everyone scattered. She pulled in the radiation and opened the door. Sergei! I don't care what kind of tantrum you are throwing. Suck it in, or I will drain you so hard you will become a black hole.

The tendrils thinned, and everyone was pale and locked in place at the table.

She walked to Zera. Here's your ice cream. And here's the spoon.

Zera grabbed her arm. Thanks for being quick.

Well, not that quick. Feral got hers first, but she told me to get up here. Sergei had his

head in his hands. What the hell happened to you?

The general cleared his throat. I suggested he choose another partner instead of you. He isn't known for his fidelity, and our family has lines of mistresses.

I know. He was very forthcoming about that, but my parents died holding each other with smiles on their faces, and I know that it shaped my ideal of what love and partnership should be.

The general cleared his throat. Didn't you kill your parents?

She smiled and said something that no one had ever listened to. My parents died because they saved me, but they died of radiation exposure in getting me to the cooling tank. It was the plutonium rods that did the damage. Not me. I was the cause but not the effect.

Zera sat back, and the prefect grabbed the ice cream, opening the lid and digging in.

Dmitri said, Thank you, Litha.

It's okay. Sergei, come with me.

He looked at her warily. Why?

Because while I don't normally reward bratty behaviour, you look like you need some ice cream. Come on, or I am going without you.

She turned and walked out, hearing him scrambling behind her.

He touched her back, and she didn't elbow him, so he kept the grip, and she led the way to the elevator.

Litha, I am not good in small spaces yet.

She looked at him. I don't want to do the stairs, so what will it take to get you in there with me?

He paused and said, May I hold you?

Sure.

He brightened up, and when they got into the elevator, she pressed the main floor and then turned and plastered herself against him. Is this distracting enough?

Sergei smiled slowly. Definitely. I apologize for my behaviour.

I am not the one that you were holding hostage. I would have just pulled you in and left you weak in the knees.

He grinned. Tempting. I would like to try that one day.

She frowned. Is this flirting?

Yes. Would you like me to notify you?

I am sure I will get the hang of it eventually.

Your side of the table offered a suggestion.

The floors ticked by. What was the suggestion?

I come here to live with you until I stabilize.

She stared into his starry eyes. Why would you want to do that?

I have a compulsion to be near you. Other women don't register with me, but my urge to remain with you is intense. My activation is calling for yours.

Litha was stunned. The elevator chimed, and they were on their floor. She moved out of his embrace and took his hand, leading him across the lobby and out to the street.

Do you often haul males around?

No. Most folks don't let me touch them. I am taking advantage of being allowed contact.

You are welcome to touch me any time you like or want.

She stopped in her tracks, and he stopped himself with an arm around her waist. Litha looked at him. Really?

Really. I have been informed of your lack of experience, but I don't want to swarm you or overwhelm you, so when you approach me naked and smiling, I will take over. Acceptable?

Um, acceptable. And if you have nightmares or cry out, I will come to you. Acceptable?

He smiled. Thank you. They were unexpected.

I warned you.

And I will not disregard your opinions in the future. Wait, did you have them?

Opinions? Tons. Nightmares? For years.

Will you tell me about them?

Not on the street. She smiled and patted his cheek. Come on, the ice cream sells out fast.

She got them moving, and soon, they were in line. When they got to the case, she took the limit of fresh strawberry and looked at him. Chocolate or butter pecan?

He grinned and took one of each.

They made it to the front of the line, and she set the containers out. The clerk grinned. Back so soon?

The prefect stole Zera's ice cream, so she needed a replacement.

She paid and grabbed a handful of spoons, dumping them into the bags. A gasp sounded from the door to the back, and she looked up. The owner was looking past her and at Sergei. Midnight?

Sergei looked, and his eyes widened. Sestrichka!

The woman with black hair looked around and waved at him. Come to the back, please. Tears were in her eyes.

Litha said, Go ahead. I can wait outside.

You knew?

You have the same features, and she's Erradian. You were bound to be related. Go.

Come with me. He grabbed their bags, and she followed him to the back.

She hung back as the siblings hugged, and they stood in silence as the fifty-ish woman held tight to him. I thought you were dead.

I was imprisoned. This woman freed me, Lidiya.

The woman looked at Litha and blinked. Dr. Litha? You rescued my brother?

I helped him out. She left that alone.

Lidiya ran to her and hugged her as well. You have no idea how much this means to me.

Litha stifled all sarcasm and just hugged the woman, who smelled like sweet cream and delight.

Okay, okay. I just hauled him out here because I thought you were familiar and might be related. Also, he was throwing a tantrum and needed some fresh air.

Lidiya chuckled and leaned back. That doesn't sound like him, but then, if he saw a pretty lady, he might throw what I know out of the window.

Yeah, there are several working at Z-Tech. She paused and said, He is going to be staying at my farm outside of town for a while. If you want to come by and visit, we could have a barbeque, you could bring your kids, and they could run around finding berries in the woods.

My children are adults.

I know, but if people don't pick them, the birds do, and I have way too much bird shit

on my deck when the berries are ripe.

Lidiya looked at Sergei. Would you mind? It would be easier than today.

I would not mind, Lidiya. I look forward to it.

Lidiya looked back to Litha. Saturday?

Certainly. I will lay in some supplies, and just let me know how many are coming.

Lidiya grinned. Like a family gathering.

Sergei nodded. Father is in town, as well, but I don't think he will stay here.

Lidiya sighed. Good. I don't like his attitude toward women. He thinks we are all interchangeable.

Litha stifled a worried whine. The ice cream needed to get to safety. Preferably inside her.

Sergei smiled. I want to know all about your last twelve years.

Fine. But I think I know yours are classified.

Hm. Maybe if we are nice, we can get Litha to dance for us. I hear she used to be very good.

Really? Says who?

Madame Dozenko. Sergei grinned.

Then, Litha, we really must persuade you to dance.

Try it after I get my fill of ribs and sausages.

Sergei grinned. Right. We need to get the ice cream to the others. One more hug?

They hugged, and Litha was squeezed again before they slipped out the back door and headed back to the boardroom laden with ice cream.

He said, Thank you.

For what? You are carrying everything.

For recognizing my features in hers.

Well, you are both very pretty. I imagine you hear that a lot.

No, not really. My energy draws in women, and I thought it was just because it was hungry, but now, I know that it was trying to find you.

Litha didn't say anything. She scanned them into the building and to the elevators. When they were inside the elevator, she backed up against him and looked over her shoulder. Is this good?

His eyes glowed as he nodded.

She bent forward to press the button for her floor and heard his soft groan. Her blush was pink in the reflection of the interior walls of the lift. She saw his gaze, and the black of his eyes was sparkling.

A few others rode up with them, and knowing glances were thrown their way.

Litha was stunned as they headed to the conference room. Against all odds, the hulking man behind her was interested, and she had a roomie and a date.

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Driving a company vehicle, she pulled into her driveway and winced at how things had spiralled. Arcady and Kritz with their other two quad members, Drin and Viktor and her other four consortium members, Sergei and his family, and Zera and her set were all coming for the barbeque on Saturday.

She got out and opened the hatch, pulling out bags of meat while Sergei was grinning. Your friends love you.

I know. It's fucking delightful. In two days, we are going to be swarmed with enough firepower to take out a continent and my guests.

He chuckled. Petrov wants cuttings; Dmitri and Nelith are happy that you are willing to consider me. He helped her pull parcels.

I am hoping that Feral will be able to come with a tracker on her until the tribunal is held.

Kritz is confident that she will. I did not anticipate you knowing how to cook.

I cooked with my mom for every holiday, including her last, and made all the rubs and marinades for my dad.

She closed the vehicle, and they hauled everything into the farmhouse.

The next ten minutes were a flurry of getting the meat into the fridge near the back porch.

Why do you have this?

It s a farm. The meat that I buy doesn t always come disassembled. One of my sheds is a butcher shop when I need it.

He laughed. That is surprising.

Why? She counted upward and nodded.

You fly among the stars, but you butcher your own meat?

My grandparents lived this way and their grandparents. The land changes, but the way we use it remains the same, so we are the ones who must adapt. What I am has nothing to do with how I choose to live, but it does alter how I think about the world around me.

He nodded. I see. You were genuinely concerned about the land around the capsule.

Yes. Don t be offended, but I knew it was the energy of an active, but I thought you were already dead. That s why I screamed when you grabbed the burned edge of the cut I made.

He handed her the last packet. I apologize for startling you, but I thought I was dreaming again.

She put the packet in and closed the door. They moved on and did the same with the fresh produce.

I thought you would grow your own?

Wrong season, and I don t have a greenhouse yet. I keep meaning to get one, but the

timing never lines up. She sighed. I don't have carpentry skills.

He nodded. I understand.

She finished organizing all the fresh stuff, grabbed the dairy products, and hauled them to the kitchen.

So, what are you making?

Tomorrow is going to be a cooking and baking prep day. I am going to try and make three varieties of dumplings, some pastry, and then marinades and rubs for the meat. Klauz is coming, and he's fussy. I can't believe he's taking a day off for this.

Fussy, how?

He owns and runs the most popular and exclusive restaurant in the city.

Oh, I see.

He will be very polite, but his consortium is used to the best and exactly what they need. Thankfully, for Drin, it is usually donuts. She is a metabolically active, and her weight fluctuates daily.

Ah, she was the elf we spoke to.

Yeah, the one that drooled on your boots.

He winced. Yes, that was unfortunate.

She shrugged. Yeah, ladies want to climb you like a tree. I get it.

Will you fight for my honour?

No. He looked surprised. I won't fight for your honour. I get enough hostility at large without courting more.

He tilted his head. You are a target?

Yes, since I was a dancer. Have you heard of a whisper active?

Sergei nodded. I have. One sentence spoken by them reverberates with truth and burrows into... that was done to you.

Another dancer. She spread the idea that I was dangerous, uncontained, and radioactive. This is twenty years later, and finally, folks are willing to listen to me.

She put the last pack of sour cream in the fridge.

Couldn't you confront the whisperer?

I could, but I have been in a bad frame of mind and might torch her on the spot. She has kids and grandkids already, so that would be bad.

You don't want to deprive anyone of a life.

Just because my life sucks doesn't mean I want to hurt anyone else who isn't actively doing harm. She stretched and looked at the bags that surprised her. Damn. Right. Freezer.

She stumbled back to the area with the extra fridges and lowered the ice cream into the freezer.

She looked at him. What did you want for dinner? Today is ready-to-eat meals, and tomorrow is cooking all day so that Saturday is less of a chore.

I will eat whatever you are eating.

She grinned. Good answer. She dove back into the freezer and started handing him single-serving packs of lasagne, meatloaf, chicken pie, and a puff pastry dessert.

Sergei's arms were loaded, and he was grinning. This is different.

Come on. Time to heat all of that up.

They returned to the kitchen, and she moved around, getting everything ready and then glancing at him. Do you mind if I do this my way?

He was leaning against the counter and watching. Go ahead.

She slowly warmed the pie and then moved her way down the line. The lasagne took the longest due to its density.

He had forks ready the moment everything was steaming. She took one, and they took the food and headed to the table on the protective trays.

Sergei grinned. Do you prep food like this often?

Yes. I forget to cook sometimes, but this way, I always know I have something to eat that I like. She chuckled. I eat a lot when I remember but forget a lot as well, so I have to keep food on standby. Every now and then, I spend a whole day making food, like tomorrow.

She looked at him. Can you cook?

My oma would have said no, and my father would say it was women s work, but yes, I can cook. My mother said there was nothing like the confidence preparing your own food gave you.

She smiled. Good. How is your stamina?

He had his last forkful of pie raised. For what?

Cooking all day is tiring. I just wanted to make sure you were feeling fine out of your confinement.

He grinned. If I need to tap out to recover, I will, but I will help in any way you let me.

All right. First, moves will be easy. Fillings for the dumplings and starting the barbeque sauce. I make my own, and the hot sauce is already done. Those I grew the peppers for.

He grinned. Can I try some?

She shrugged and went to the pantry to get a bottle.

She popped the top and set it down in front of him. There you go. I have mild, medium and hot. This is medium. It s good on the meatloaf, but start with a drop.

He tried it and grinned. That is good. Not just hot but very flavourful.

She laughed and smiled. That was the point.

He used more, and then, she winced as he drank it. Starry tendrils started leaking out of his eyes, and she started laughing. It is cumulative.

He coughed, and she got him some water and some full-fat milk.

She set it down, and he sipped at both. The milk did a better job.

He coughed and put a few drops on his lasagne before tucking in. Litha couldn't stop giggling.

Lesson learned. Thank you for not bringing me the hot sauce.

I was watching the men at the party compete with the number of pickled peppers in a stack. I am guessing the urge is genetic.

He grinned. My little sister was always above such things.

Litha smiled. It does explain your sex life. A little is good; so much more must be better.

He paused and got serious. Like many actives, I have a hunger for connection, and my activation allowed me to indulge in it. It comforted me.

She looked at the sincerity in his expression. You are lucky to have found comfort.

He jolted, and his eyes widened. And you did not.

She worked on her lasagna without another word.

She finished and said, Did you want me to clear up or, okay, all leftovers are yours. I am going to exercise a bit, and then, I will make dessert.

He nodded. I will finish up and find you.

She put her dishes in the sink and headed to the barn.

She was panting, sweating, and pressing her ribs when she heard, How many fouett s was that?

Twenty-nine. I can t break twenty-nine. Never could.

She looked over at him, and to her surprise, he was grinning and wearing sweats and pointe shoes.

Wait. You danced?

Three years professionally. It was a government espionage situation, but I still had to learn.

She watched as he went to warm up. You were considered stealthy?

There was an Uraddan ballerina, and we were trying to get her free of her government.

Oh, so you threw yourself on your sword, so to speak.

He grimaced. My appetites were excessive, and if I had any idea I would be in this situation, I would have been far more selective and careful.

Hindsight, huh? Well, if I had known you were in there ten years ago, I would have gotten you out.

He paused and nodded. I believe I understand.

She watched him as he warmed up, and he asked for some upbeat music. She played

it, and he began some hopping steps, and then, he began to dance. Jumps, kicks, flips, and some of the dancing the Erradians were known for.

She smiled and sat back, watching with her own eyes someone other than her perform. She had been teased with the idea of going to the ballet with her patron, but he had never made the arrangements.

She was getting a private performance. When he rested, she cheered and clapped.

Sergei's grin was sheepish. I am woefully out of practice. His chest gleamed with sweat.

Well, no more so than me. You were very good, and I can't do those kicks that I saw your people engage in.

Would you like me to teach you?

Can you?

Certainly. It is hard on the ass and thighs, though.

She stood up. Well then, let's start slow.

How do you react when lifted?

It's been a while.

Can we try some trust exercises?

Like a fall? It doesn't scare me. I never hit the ground.

Like lifts.

Oh. Um. Okay.

What started as something cute turned into a night of torment as he slid his hands around her ribs, between her thighs, and her most vulnerable spot. Under her arm.

To have a man staring down at you while you collapsed in giggles wasn't something she had experienced before. He reached for her, but when his fingers grazed her triceps, she shrieked in laughter.

He was grinning as he crouched. This is possibly the most shocking thing I have learned about you.

She wheezed. It happens a couple of times a year, and apparently, this is one of those times.

You don't say. He scooped his arms under her and lifted her onto his lap, sitting on the floor.

Litha wiped tears from her eyes and cleared her throat. Sorry.

Don't apologize. That was fun. You are scarily self-contained.

I am aware. She huffed a calming breath.

He stroked her jaw and tilted her chin. She frowned and looked up, but his kiss came in place of more gentle mocking.

He kept the contact light as he brushed his lips over hers again and again until she moved to catch him for something firmer.

She couldn't catch him and backed away, confused. Um, okay. Showers and sleep.

He blinked. I thought we were getting along.

Were we? I have no clue. She levitated out of his grip and removed her pointe shoes, putting on her puffy boots.

She walked past him and said, Please turn the light off when you are done.

* * * *

Sergei watched her walk across the yard and get back into the house. He contacted Dmitri. Cousin, I have some confusion.

Nelith is with me. Is that a problem?

No. It might be helpful.

What is it?

I was kissing Litha, and it was going well. I was teasing her a little, and she suddenly pulled back.

Dmitri looked to the side and said, Idiot. Moron. Twit. I am translating for my dear wife.

Right. Can you ask her what I did wrong?

Dmitri kept his head cocked. Litha was homeschooled. Her parents were researchers. She doesn't know what physical affection feels like, and if it never progresses, she thinks it won't. Nelith was assaulted several times in her lifetime, so she understood

the entire spectrum of things. Litha hasn't been allowed to be near anything and just sees people coupling up around her. Intellectually, she knows things, but she has no physical idea of what happens next. If things stall out, she assumes you lost interest.

Oh. So, if I was a teen, a girl kissed me, and that was it. I didn't know what was coming next, so I couldn't expect what came next. But she knows what comes next and knew that it wasn't heading that way. Understanding crashed around him. Thank Nelith for me, Dmitri.

He ended the call and headed back to the house and the room she had pointed out to him. He heard her moving in the room down the hall, and while he wanted to go and continue what they had started, he now understood that she wasn't in the mood for teasing. She was on or off. She didn't have a midway setting because she had no settings.

He took a shower, climbed into bed, and lay back, trying to sense Litha in the house. He found her and sighed as he lay back in the bed with the quilt that her grandmother had probably made.

He really hoped he didn't dream.

Midnight woke slowly, and he heard the laughter outside. Last chance for air before your radiation poisons your own people as you rot.

I am a negotiator. He slammed his hands on the perfectly smooth surface inside the container he was in.

Actives don't speak for anyone in Uradda!

He heard a countdown, and then, the capsule heated and lifted off. He screamed and shouted, but no one heard him.

* * * *

Litha bolted down the hall and ran to his room. Light and energy were flaring wildly, and his hands were clawing at a barrier that wasn't there.

She pulled in the extra radiation and began to sing over his shouting. She walked to him and touched the top of his head, stroking him as she continued singing an Erradian folk song. His arms snapped out and pulled her against him.

She lay with her head pressed to his jaw and his arms around her. He breathed in deep and shuddered into a restful breathing.

Well, one of them was getting rest.

He let her go near dawn, and she staggered to her room, set her alarm, and crashed. If she got an hour, that should be good enough.

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A soft knocking on her door got Litha up. Her alarm was trying to wake her, but it wasn't working. She sighed. Yeah. I am up.

Sergei walked in with two cups of coffee. I made some coffee, and the pastry from last night is in the oven. Your alarm sounded desperate.

He held out a cup to her and easily crouched down next to her. She took one of the cups and sipped the sweet and evil coffee. Thanks for that.

Rough night?

Yeah. You could say that. She sipped at the coffee, trying to get the caffeine in and working.

Whoa. Watch it. That's hot. He paused, and his bronze cheeks darkened. Right. Sorry.

Litha finished and tossed her blanket aside. She got up and stretched. I'm gonna get dressed, and I will be right back.

She grabbed some clothes from her drawers and went into the ensuite.

When she came out, he was standing and looking around. There was a soft smile on his expression, and she looked at what he was seeing. It was her report cards, academic achievements, and an album and posters from her dance career.

You have a shrine to yourself?

She shook her head. It was a shrine to family pride. My activation made me leave my name behind, but I didn't leave my family, and they only left me when they had to.

How many do you have?

This farmhouse. They are all gone. My great-grandparents immigrated when they activated and met here in Aksalla.

Both sides?

Yes. She shrugged. They were very proud of me and my surviving an unheard of power level. I have embraced it recently because it lets me threaten Torun. That is a sport in and of itself. She smiled. Right. Got to make more coffee and get the dough for the dumplings started. I am really running behind.

He smiled. I have done the dough, made what I hoped were the fillings you wanted, and am uncertain as to what you need for your sauce.

She stared at him hopefully. Really?

Really. I am guessing you hadn't made the dough before, and that is the one thing I am very good at. The fillings can be tweaked now that they are cooked and cooling.

She held her cup wide and hugged him. Thank you so much.

He wrapped his free arm around her. It was my pleasure and a bit of fun. The dough has to sit for six hours, and oh, shoot, the pastry.

He unwound from her and sprinted down the steps.

Litha couldn't fight her grin as she walked in after him while he was pulling the

pastries out and exhaling slowly. They re fine. Just some dark edges.

He set them down and looked at her smile. He leaned in and kissed her, and she went up on her toes. She was exhausted but relieved. When she lowered herself, he had that soft expression again.

She clutched her cup and went to make more, only to find a carafe waiting for her. She poured it and took a sip. The sugar was already in it. Yay.

So, where do we start with the sauce?

She laughed. You will like this. It starts with sugar.

He nodded. Just tell me what to do.

She slugged down some more coffee and went to the pantry, pulling ingredients from every shelf. With her arms full, she walked over to the stove and got started, telling him what she was doing as she was doing it. The smell started off slowly, and when she was finished with her witchcraft, she watched the thoughtful expression on Sergei s face.

She giggled. You should try the family chilli recipe.

I would like to. Not a lot of tomato-based foods in Erradian cooking.

She grinned. Well, since you have saved me so much time, I can make a batch, but I am making enough to freeze later.

I will enjoy learning it.

It takes about five hours, but only half an hour is active.

He grinned. She stared, and when it clicked, she blushed. I am going to go to the freezer.

I will follow. He snagged a pastry and started munching.

Litha got out one pound of beef and one of pork, and then, she returned to the kitchen. It was second nature to thaw them on the walk.

Why two meats?

One for flavour, one for texture.

He nodded, watched as she browned the meat, and returned to the pantry. She added beans and tomatoes, spices and stock.

Why the beans?

Family tradition.

He nodded, and when everything was bubbling in harmony, she turned the heat down low and turned to him. Now, a pastry for me, and then, we check on what is next.

You mentioned rubs. You eat; I will assemble.

Fine. I will quickly get the ingredients together, and then, I will give you directions.

Thank you.

She whirled around the pantry again and set everything on the counter. The bowl and whisk were there, along with measuring cups. She sat across the counter and began to steer him.

The pastries were pretty good.

* * * *

Sergei smiled as she slumped to the counter and started to breathe slowly. As the morning had gone on, he had remembered her scent and body against him. She had stayed with him last night.

She had been awake because she was uncomfortable or just not used to sleeping with anyone else in the bed.

He moved around her, lifted her, and walked her to the window seat where another of the endless quilts was waiting. He settled her and pulled the quilt up over her shoulder. She mumbled and pulled the quilt to her jaw.

He got back to the rubs, looked around for a book, and found recipes written in a masculine hand with notes to Litha. He saw the recipe for sauce she had crafted without looking and the chilli that smelled amazing already. With a little bit of flipping, he found the rub recipe he had just finished and found a few more. He looked around and saw a jar to put the rub in, and then, he made a different one with more heat. He marked it carefully. He marked everything carefully. He hadn't had this much fun in years.

He tried to remember the last time he had enjoyed himself this much and smirked. He knew that she was still around, so he called his mom. She answered, and her eyes were wide, Sergei? You are well?

Yes, Mom. I am well. How do you make buns?

Calina blinked. Buns? You are baking now?

Yes. The woman who guards my dreams is asleep, so I thought I would help her with baking. I remember that I enjoyed it until Dad caught on. Oh, there is a party at Litha's place tomorrow. Do you have time to attend?

Is Litha another one of your lovers?

No, she will be my last lover. I am sated when she touches me but hungry only for her.

His mother's glorious blue eyes teared up. Really?

Really. Now, do you want to meet her?

Yes. When? How soon? I don't want to interfere with the party, but I could help bake or something.

We are making dumplings in a few hours. If she agrees, may I come get you for that?

Yes, please ask her. Where is she now?

Sleeping. She guarded me all night against my demons. She's tired.

A sleepy voice murmured, She's also not deaf. That is your mother?

He turned and smiled. Her hair had fallen out of its constant bonds, and she looked so damn sexy with that slow, sleepy smile on her lips. It is. Her name is Calina. She can come? Truly?

Truly.

He grinned. Are you ready now, Mom?

She laughed. Let me get my shoes.

He triangulated her location and grinned. I will be there in five minutes.

Litha sighed. Call your sister. If she can get away from work, she might enjoy a quiet visit before tomorrow.

He made the call, and Lidiya beamed. I am on my way. I will be there in half an hour.

Litha chuckled. I should be actually awake by then.

He grinned. Do you have any family you want to invite to this particular cooking orgy?

Litha thought about it and blushed. There is one, but I don't know if she is available.

Call her.

Litha lifted her hand and waved at the person who answered the com. Hiya, Cipher. I have a partner, I think-

Sergei felt his chest swell with happiness to be claimed.

And we are having a get-together with the ladies from his family, and he asked if I had family, and I thought of you. His mother will be here in ten minutes and his sister in half an hour. Lidiya, from the ice cream shop. Litha laughed. See you soon.

She lowered her arm and there was a happy smile. Cipher is coming.

Who is Cipher?

Litha's expression twisted. I suppose you could say she is my daughter.

Sergei could have been knocked over with a feather.

* * * *

Litha looked at his stunned expression and got to her feet, walking over to kiss his cheek. Go get your mom. I will still be here to explain.

He nodded and left the house to step through the stars.

Litha exhaled and checked on the rubs. He had done a good job and had found the recipe book. She set the kettle to boil and put a pot and teacup with a saucer out. Cipher. Her only blood relative left, and she was going to be here in a few minutes. Genetically, Cipher was her daughter. Well, her daughter and Nelith's. That is how she met Nelith, to begin with. They were both asked to contribute confirmation samples, and while Nelith now had twenty-seven beings crafted from her eggs, she was Litha's first cellular contribution. Samples had been stolen shortly after Litha had stabilized. Hers had been among them.

Cipher was the result.

There was a soft flash in the yard, and Litha wiped her hands on her thighs and walked outside. Cipher. It is so good to see you again.

She looked at Litha with bright and familiar features. Hello, Litha.

Cipher walked up to her. May I hug you?

I am getting into hugs, so please.

They hugged, and Cipher laughed softly. You are looking hopeful. That s new.

Litha leaned back. I think I am. I have met someone. He isn t in a hurry-which is a little bit frustrating-but he says that he dreams of me or doesn t dream because of me or is not hungry because of me. Something.

Cipher stroked her cheek. It sounds like he is focused on you, and it is about time someone is.

She grinned. I agree.

The kettle whistled, and they went inside to wait for Sergei and his mother.

When the transport was felt, Litha smiled. They are here.

You can introduce me as Cipher or Kiska.

That s a pretty name.

Yeah, I thought so. It s a lot less clinical. She followed and hid behind Litha.

They walked outside, and Litha smiled and waved, and then she felt Cipher step out beside her.

Sergei stared. Holy shit.

The older woman next to Sergei beamed. Which one is your love, Sergei?

He flushed, and he held out his hand. Litha stepped forward and went to stand in front of the woman who still had the long black hair and lovely bronze complexion that she had given to her son. Her eyes were still sparkling green, but she didn t look a year

over fifty.

Hello, ma am. I am Litha.

The woman stepped toward her and cupped her cheeks. Litha blinked and fought the urge to make fish lips. You are stunning, little star.

Um, thank you. My mom was beautiful, and I seemed to have given my daughter those delightfully active genes. Ma am, this is my daughter, Kiska.

Kiska waved. Hello.

The woman gasped. Daughter?

Kiska laughed. I was lab-grown, and my existence began in Uradda twenty-six years ago.

Oh. I have been hearing about that. Dmitri's new wife was one of those.

She was the originator of the eggs. Kiska smiled. I have two moms.

Litha chuckled. Feral is coming tomorrow for the party.

Kiska grinned.

Litha got her face free.

Sergei smiled. My mother's name is Calina.

The older woman beamed. Call me Calina, please, Litha and Kiska. This is very exciting. A daughter and granddaughter in one day.

Litha stared at Sergei, and he wrapped an arm around her waist, leaning in for a kiss.

The kiss went on and on, and she was leaning up until Sergei flinched and pulled away, Yes, Ma.

We have pierogi to make. Get your ass inside and start dusting the table. Oh, and bring in the samovar.

Litha blinked and covered her mouth. What s a samovar?

Calina said, We drink a lot of tea. It keeps the water hot.

He picked up the ornate object and carried it inside.

Kiska chuckled. Litha never has a problem with hot water.

Calina paused and said, Well, it looks pretty, and it s tradition.

Tradition? I thought that was the ring thing.

No, that is just for the groom. This is from the groom s family. It means even if he buggers off, you still have a mom.

Litha teared up as they walked into the house, and Kiska rubbed her back.

By the time Lidiya arrived, the pierogi-making was in full swing.

She switched out with Sergei to season the ribs for the following day, and when that was done, it was back to the flour fight.

Kiska laughed and wiped flour off her forehead. The first thing Litha told me about

flour was that it was highly combustible. I should never light anything near loose flour.

Sergei was cutting the dough circles and rolling out more dough, and the ladies were putting in the filling and sealing the crescents.

When the trays finished, they were swept off to the freezer on flat sheets. Fortunately, there was a vertical freezer for just this sort of thing.

By six, they were all hungry, so Kiska called in a pizza order and went to get it. She was back in six minutes with a huge stack of pizza and a bag of sodas. Lidiya got some canning jars out, filling them with ice cream, and they poured in the soda. Floats were had by all in the dust of their labours. While the pizzas were passed around, Litha looked around at the women and Sergei. He was at ease with men and at ease with women. He smoothed over all lulls in conversation.

He grinned and said, Ma, Litha s a dancer.

Calina smiled. Lovely. I was a dancer in my younger days. It s how I ended up as a wife with two children instead of just a mistress. My activation was minor, but it let me survive both pregnancies.

Much to my father s consternation. Lidiya chuckled. Sergei was a delight, and I was a shock.

Sergei chuckled. See, Litha? I am a delight.

She laughed. You are wearing pepperoni on the side of your face, dumbass.

Kiska started laughing. Litha looked around just in time to see Calina look at Kiska with a finger to her lips in a shushing motion. Kiska grinned and leaned over to hug

Litha with one arm. Love you, Mom.

Litha felt suspicious, but there wasn't any malice around the table. They talked about childhoods and fond memories, and everyone but Kiska took part.

Kiska was smiling and laughing with them, but when Calina looked over, she sighed in response to the question. I don't want to bring down the mood, so I am not going to answer. On to the first time Litha melted her ice cream before it could get to her mouth.

Calina frowned, and Sergei said, She was raised in an Uraddan lab, Ma.

Oh. Fuck. I am sorry. I forgot. Calina frowned.

We can talk about it another day. Kiska grinned. I don't think we are going anywhere.

Litha smiled. I hope not. I am liking this feeling.

Lidiya laughed. Me, too. Litha, thank you for rescuing my thug of a brother, and Sergei, thank you for not going mad before she could find you.

He toasted her with his float.

Litha said, Well, I did get paid for it, so...

They laughed, and soon, Sergei had to return his mother home so she could make preparations to join the party the next day. She had things she wanted to bring.

They all went outside and hugged. Lidiya drove Kiska back to town, and Sergei took his mother home. Litha went inside, organized the leftovers, and was taking the boxes outside when Sergei arrived.

Tidying up?

Yeah, the flour is clear. Now I get to do my favourite trick. She held up her hand and fired two streams of plasma at the cardboard, causing it to roar and then turn to ash.

She laughed. I love using that one.

Sergei gasped. You have eye lasers?

She giggled. I do.

He walked over to her, lifted her, and kissed her. That is really hot.

She slid her arms around his neck and held tight as he walked back to the house wearing her.

She separated them by an inch. File this under consent.

He murmured, My room or yours?

Mine, there is more space.

His eyes were bleeding darkness and crackling wildly. She kissed him again, and he brought them to her room. He slid her shirt over her head, holding her under her thighs.

He had to set her down to get her leggings off, and from there, she took care of her own underwear. He matched her speed, and when he picked her up again, it was a very different sensation. She started rocking and rubbing against him, and he groaned into her mouth and settled her on the bed. It was a very educationally stimulating night.

Litha smelled coffee again, but this time, the morning had just started outside the window.

Sergei eased into the room and chuckled. You woke up.

Yes. You would have been in trouble if I didn't. She chuckled. I don't think that fucked to death is something I have ever faced before.

Well, you took to it with gratifying enthusiasm. He held out the coffee with a pastry on top.

Litha sat up and watched the coffees wobble. Taking pity on him, she pulled her quilt over her and sat against the headboard. She reached for the cup. Thank you very much.

He sat next to her, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. Well, I can see what the fuss is about. It makes me resent it a little, but then you weren't here, and I trust you, so I suppose things happened when they should.

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She munched the pastry. It was a little stale but still good. The coffee was just as strong and sweet as it had been the day before.

So, when do you have to head back?

I don't. I was declared legally dead; my wealth was dispersed among my family, and my home sold. They are offering to return them, but I like the idea of a clean start. Aksalla seems nice. His fingers stroked her arm.

Well, I have a bit of money, and if you wanted to retire in style, I know an island with a lot of friendly people who wouldn't mind some extra firepower.

You really do?

I really do. It's where Nelith's offspring live. They are outside the reach of the Sethir-Nin and able to back each other up.

Why are they a concern?

Oh, well, all of the clones are omegas. Even Kiska.

Whoa. Right. What about staying here and starting a dance school? From what I remember, Aksallan dancers lacked soul.

A school?

A school, an Erradian restaurant, something that helps your roots grow.

Why?

Because you have friends here. A day job here, and your daughter is here.

I didn't raise her. She was freed after the invasion, and we met then.

She's an active?

Oh, yeah.

I didn't feel anything from her. He was curious.

No, you wouldn't. When you have a moment and no one but myself is around, ask her. She will show you.

What is the secret?

She sighed. The Uraddans tried to coax either my fire or Nileth's blades out of her using every means at their disposal. First, they had to cut out her wings.

You mean cut off.

No, cut out. Severed muscle and bone. Took them and ripped them apart to copy the material that her feathers were made of. They couldn't duplicate it, but they tried to see if her hair or nails would produce the mineral. They did not. By the time Uradda was pried open, there was little left of her. She is recovering slowly and looks to regenerate fully in a few years, but she's scarred.

I really want to rip Uradda apart right now.

It is already shattered. They are begging for their actives back. They can't do the

work of their bound army and are beginning to seek other more affluent countries. She chuckled. They are finding out that very few places want non-actives who are known for their discrimination against actives. Most countries value us. Even if the capitol tries to restrict and regulate the means by which we use our activations, they still don't want us in chains, yet.

He sighed. Erradia has always fought to maintain independence from our hostile neighbours. I am regretting being stuck in a box while they were here throwing a fit.

She smiled. Don't worry. While I was technically at work all day, I may have been seen taking fire from Uraddan heavy guns and destroying military vehicles.

He glanced at her, and she smiled back at him. If I was there, and I wasn't, it was a very exciting day. After we got the actives and their families free, I flew escort on vehicles that got them to the waiting stations to record them as refugees, and when they were surrounded by others, I flew back to work.

You took on Uraddian heavy guns?

Sure. They tickle. They are just energy weapons. I eat that sort of thing.

He chuckled. My omas would have loved you. They were tough women.

She smiled. My parents would have been telling you that my attitude would temper over time.

I like your attitude. It is no-nonsense. Sometimes, I need someone to get my attention. He chuckled. But since I became a general, it is difficult to find people to hold me in line.

Aw. I think I can take you.

I am guessing yes. He chuckled. Since you can consume my energy manipulation, I would have to say yes.

Yeah. You are close to my energy class, but astral to nova is a bit of a stretch.

He grinned. It is. You were born to be you, and I was born to be me. And we both look far younger than our ages.

She laughed. Yeah, when your mom shared that one, I had to blink for a while.

Good thing Lid was sitting with more ice cream on standby. She uses our great oma's recipes, and they are an excellent distraction.

Litha said, How long can we stay in bed before we have to start things?

I think we should get started and take a break midmorning.

That's calculated.

Isn't it just. Sergei squeezed her. It is also when my mother, sister, and possibly an auntie might arrive.

Auntie?

Dmitri's mother. My half-sister.

Ah. Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Does Dmitri cook?

No idea. That is between him and Nelith. I found refuge and peace in cooking. I don't know if he was given that opportunity.

She finished her breakfast and stretched. She smiled. Right. Fast shower or solar shower?

What?

We can clean up without wasting time. I just don't like to do it in bed because too much light radiation messes up the fabric.

He grinned. This I would like to see.

She set her cup down and got to her feet. She looked at him, and he looked her over. Oh, little star. You are stunning.

Uh-huh. I can stun you another time. Up on your feet.

He got up, and she looked him over. Well, part of you was already up.

He chuckled and removed his clothing for the flash shower.

There. I even bleached your teeth.

He laughed. That is handy.

Yeah, once we get you clothing made from UV-resistant fabrics, I can do it while you are dressed. She cocked her head. But I might still flash fry your bits before they get inside me. Safety first.

Fair enough. He laughed. Can we dress now?

Yeah. Today is going to have more people who know what I am than ever before.

Will you dance with me later?

Of course.

He leaned down and said, I am going to get dressed properly for a day of socializing.

She nodded. And I am going to be comfy but stylish.

Meet you downstairs in a few minutes. I have already enlisted assistance via Zera.

What kind of help?

I don t know, but Drin is pulling up to the house.

Shit!

Litha was dressed, pulling her hair back in its accustomed tail and stepping into shoes she used in the yard. She came out and looked at Drin as she was coordinating a large truck to settle near the grass.

Morning, Litha. Zera gave me the day off to help organize your party. This is fun. Drin grinned and then looked at her. Oh, wow. You look so different at home.

Litha chuckled. Yeah, I do. When everyone around me isn t scared shitless that I will sneeze and irradiate them, it helps me kick back a little.

Well, Khytten s Baola called and told me what was needed, so I am all for it.

Litha sighed. Seers.

Sergei came out looking sharp in a button-down shirt and black trousers. Hey, Litha. I

am going to get my mom and auntie. They are going to take over your kitchen.

Acceptable.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her. Back in ten minutes.

No more samovars.

He laughed. Yours is warming up.

She wrinkled her nose. Go. I get the feeling she spent the night or morning making buns.

I am not going to take that bet. He kissed her quickly and disappeared in a flash of midnight sky.

Litha chuckled, and Drin was staring at her. What?

Litha, you look... you are stunning.

I always was. I was just surrounded by people who wouldn't touch me. It causes a hit to the ego. Litha smiled. Wow, this looks very formal for a barbeque.

Drin looked innocent. Does it? Go make a list of food that needs to be made, boss.

Tables were being set out on the gravel yard near the barn, and chairs were being brought. The chairs were fairly hefty as they were going to be supporting some pretty sizable actives.

Litha went inside, gathered her valuables, and took them upstairs, including her cookbook. It was all books, but she wanted to make sure that she kept them safe.

Family albums meant a lot.

Sergei entered her room and said, Keeping things from curious fingers?

Yeah. My parents kept track of every part of my life until the moment they passed. It feels wrong to leave that out where people can see them.

He smiled. Baby pictures?

A few. That pink book over there.

He laughed and snagged it, making awestruck sounds at her extreme cuteness. One day, you need to show my mother these. She has always said I was the prettiest baby in the country, and I think you are far more adorable than myself.

Litha smiled. If we ever have kids, they are probably going to be little spuds. Not that I am shopping for offspring, I just wouldn't object.

He looked over and smiled. If we are blessed, we will be blessed. Spuds or no.

She laughed.

On that vein of thought. He knelt and took her hand. Litha, will you marry me?

Um, why?

He smiled. Because as much as it does not matter to me, as long as I have you, my mother pointed out that there is a legal pension you could apply for if we were married and anything happened to me. She also wants you to be a wife and not a mistress. She has issues.

Litha laughed. Not like we don't have our own baggage. She paused. Wait. Did you just propose?

He grinned and brought out a wide band studded with different gems. I did. Will you marry me?

Um, yes?

He slid the ring onto the middle finger of her left hand. He kissed her knuckle and got to his feet, hugging her tight.

You are definitely going to be going to therapy.

He nodded. Accepted. I was able to sleep through the night with no nightmares.

You didn't sleep.

Yes, thank you. He kissed the tip of her nose.

She wrinkled her nose. You got me a ring. What do you get for the engagement?

If you dance with me, I will consider that your public pledge.

Oh, you mean dance. Okay. I think I have an outfit that will get the idea across.

Accepted.

She hugged him back and went to her closet, pulling out the white dress studded with clear gems. It was spectacular and would be easy to dance in.

He looked at it and nodded. I can get something to compliment it. It will be an

excellent celebration.

Are you going to hop back to Erradia and swipe something?

He wagged his eyebrows. Yes.

She snorted. I may have to remake this ring into something less melty.

Acceptable.

Fine. Go and commit petty crime. She swatted his butt lightly, and he barked a laugh, disappearing in stars and darkness.

She walked down to the main floor, and Calina and her sibling were working with the command of battlefield generals. There were folks in white uniforms moving around her kitchen and hauling things outside. Morning, Calina.

Sergei's mother came over, kissed her cheek, and shrieked in happiness over the ring. Calina's sister came over and grinned, introducing herself as Nadia and then called out, Irina, come here. They are engaged.

Irina grinned and wiped her hands. She looked to be in her early forties. Thank goodness. This day would be strange if they weren't.

Litha suddenly put it together. We are getting married.

Irina chuckled. He didn't tell you.

He did not. Wait. You are Dmitri's mother. Sergei's aunt.

Yes, now back to the wedding.

They bustled her out to her gazebo, where a small table with lemonade and small sandwiches had been set up.

The rank of five industrial grills made her eyes widen. Klauz was there in his whites, ordering his team around.

When she looked at him and waved, he smiled and walked over. So, you have figured out that you are having a wedding?

I have. Um, thank you for coming.

This is fun. You had all the materials here, so my team just had to make the salads and sides. This is a lovely place, by the way. You must find it very calming.

I did. She laughed. I will again. Oh, there is the troublemaker that stirred this up.

Sergei came toward them, and Klauz muttered, Damn. You two side by side will be blinding. His eye flickered, and he chuckled. Kritz is urgently trying to finish his paperwork. He wants to speak to both of you.

Feral walked in behind Sergei, and her new bodysuit with the flippy skirt looked like semi-formalwear. Sergei came up to the gazebo and took a seat. I put the costume in my room.

Good. We are having a wedding.

Yes. I decided that since all of your people were here, it was a good idea to do it, and then, we can sort out everything else.

She smiled. You are correct. She got up and walked to Feral. Hello, little girl. How are you doing?

Good. My heat is over, and the charges have been dropped once the list from the Uraddan refugee centre was brought forward. All of my targets were on it.

Litha hugged her, and Feral chuckled. Glad that you and Sergei are getting along.

The barbeque has turned into a wedding since everyone we love was coming anyway.

They got another chair and sat together in the gazebo while the souz vide tanks were prepped and steaks were vacuum sealed. Klauz spent a lot of time making out with Drin, which lasted until Viktor showed up. Ekron arrived in his golden glory. Techor and Remark were all around her shortly, and Drin put her foot down and set them all to work.

It was just before the official start of the party when someone slowly walked down the drive. Litha got up and ran toward her, the woman held her arms out, and they hugged, holding on.

Litha leaned back. Amber. You... you're here.

Yeah. I got an invitation from Zera, and she paid a transporter to get me here. I would like to play something in celebration if you don't mind.

Litha nodded. Please. Absolutely. I love listening to you. Can you still display?

I can, and I will. May I take what I need from you and your fiancé?

Please. Litha bent forward and felt the cool wave on her mind.

Thank you. Amber smiled. Now, to your fiancé. He looks worried.

He frequently looks worried when I just take off toward strange activities. She linked

arms with Amber and walked toward Sergei.

He was standing, and he smiled. Another daughter?

Amber shook her head. No. I am her sister. I don't have the same activation, but I would like to perform at the reception, if I may.

Certainly. Do you dance?

Oh. No. I play, but I would like to perform something about each of you, and to do so, I would like to see the memories of you and Litha. Nothing intimate. I don't show that.

Sergei nodded. Certainly.

Litha muttered, Touch her forehead with yours.

He did, and then Amber said, Thank you.

Sergei looked at her. Sister? How old are you? You look very young.

I have a legal adult classification.

She's forty-six. She was an early activation, and everyone was freaked out at the UV radiation she emitted when she was four, so she was put into stasis and held there until our parents' deaths caused a probate search that identified that she was still four years old and in stasis. She was put into care in the capitol, and we got in touch when she was declared an adult two years ago.

Amber nodded. What they don't tell you about stasis is that your mind ages even if your thought process is slowed.

Sergei nodded. I know.

Litha watched her older sister nod. Amber had been forgotten. Her radiation had been considered dangerous the moment that it appeared. Amber was the reason that her parents had a plan in place when Litha went off.

Amber whispered, Is this Grandma s house?

Litha nodded. I have the album with your baby pictures and the crayon drawings that you made.

Amber smiled. May I see them?

Litha felt eager. Come on.

Sergei mentioned a daughter?

Cipher. Kiska.

Oh, right. Amber nodded.

They went up and sat on the bed, looking through all the memories left in Amber s room. Her first steps, her first picture, and her mother holding her with Litha in her belly.

I am sorry for the way things happened.

Amber smiled softly. You had nothing to do with it. I was frozen long before you had taken your first steps. I was so worried about you that they said they would document everything about you so that when I could come out, I could know everything and be the best big sister.

Litha's eyes widened. They did. They recorded everything, no matter how small. I was in ballet for a while before a ballerina whispered a rumour about me being toxic.

Oh, is she still around? I can drive her mad.

She's married with kids, just as normal and non-active as she pretended to be.

Amber sighed. Too bad.

Where are you working now?

Um, I flunked out of the program.

What? Why?

I don't know. I didn't even make it to the interview stage. I tried to get a work visa to Aksalla so I could contact you, but that didn't work either. When I got contacted today, I jumped at the chance.

You didn't have my contact info?

Um, no. The last time we were together, I didn't have my com yet. I was just able to get enough for a base unit this month. Amber shoved her wrist out, and it was a basic above-dermal unit. It crackles a bit, but it works.

Litha frowned. I can get you a subdermal unit and a new receiver.

I came here to celebrate, not mooch. Today is about you and Sergei and music and food and dancing.

It is also about family and friends and everyone being well.

I am well. I am family? Amber asked hesitantly.

Litha hugged her and warmed her sister. The hugging is new. I am trying it out.

It s good.

There was a knock, and Kiska was standing there. I was told you were inside.

Kiska, this is your aunt, my sister, Amber.

Your sister? Kiska walked in and smiled. I have a tiny auntie.

Amber laughed. I am not that small.

You are petite and frail.

I am the current longest applied stasis in recorded history.

Litha said softly, I am going to put that on your wall.

Amber looked at her and then burst into bright giggles.

Kiska gave Amber her contact info, and Litha did the same. Feral came in, and she was added to the mix.

Drin came up with an armload of garment bags. Ekron s mom sent these. They will fit everyone.

Amber stared at the glittering elf and said, Okay, ladies. I will leave you to change.

Drin smiled. This isn t for me; this one is for you. Big sisters should always attend

weddings.

Amber swallowed. I am not nearly as close to her as you and Feral and Kiska are. I would far rather just play something.

Drin smiled. Ekron is going to sing something.

Amber looked at her. Then, he will have to save it for the flight home. She is my sister, and I have something prepared for her and Sergei. Are we clear?

Drin laughed. I am. The information is being relayed. I have two psychics hooked into me. After seeing him here, they will be expecting him to perform.

Tough. I am sure that it will be at the back of their minds when I have completed my contribution.

Litha looked at the sky-blue dress that would look wonderful on her little sister. Put this on.

Amber blinked.

Kiska will be my maid of honour, but you and Feral will be bridesmaids.

Amber took the dress. You are bossy.

I prefer assertive.

I prefer to wear my own clothes. I am going to be terrified of staining this.

Litha chuckled. We eat after the ceremony is over. No one will mind.

Drin nodded. These dresses were a gift. What happens, happens. Trust me, a little food won't destroy her designs. I have done way worse. She paused. Well, not me precisely.

Kiska snorted, Amber shook her head, and Feral rolled her eyes. They got dressed, Litha put on her white dress, and they all smiled.

Amber looked at her and touched her thumbs together before lifting them and setting the solid light crown on Litha's head. Now, you are ready.

Kiska stared and slowly smiled. Feral looked at Amber and then Litha. She nodded. Now she's ready.

Litha listened to the gloriously haunting notes of Amber's violin as her sister walked ahead of the others. It was a solid projection, just as Litha's crown was, but it sounded amazing. When she was facing Sergei, Nelith spoke. Some of you know Litha, others Sergei, but Litha's elder sister has prepared an introduction.

Amber lifted the violin again, wild classical music spilled out, and the entire area was filled with images of Sergei and Litha from childhood to now. Litha as a teen in the tank with the water boiling around her and more pouring in. Destroying particles from space that would take out cities. Catching solar storms. Litha saw it all, but she watched Sergei's time in the military against Uradda, his capture at the hands of an active wired for complete control. His projection of his stars inside the capsule that kept him sane until she cut light into his life again.

The music soared as their dancing together took over, the dancing, the lifts, the laughing, and the quiet moments, and that is where the music slowed and tapered off.

Nelith sighed. Dude, that was amazing.

Amber blushed, stepped back, and faded to a soft grey. Litha looked at her and mouthed, Thank you.

Then, it was turning to Sergei with her halo of light and stars, and she took his hands. Their vows were simple, and Litha hoped someone would tell her what they were at a later date.

She remembered the kiss, and that was the part she wanted to focus on.

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Amber ate a little and then went to the ice cream bar. A woman near it smiled. The music and display were beautiful.

Thank you.

I am Lidiya. I am Sergei's sister. Our half-sister is around here somewhere. We are your family now as well.

Amber smiled. You are? I thought Litha was all I had.

No. She has married into a very boisterous family with many arms. So, her new sister is now your new sister. Her new mother is now your new mother. Lidiya smiled. May I hug you?

Oh. Certainly.

Amber hugged the woman who was offering herself as a new relative. The hug was warm, and Amber smiled. Thank you.

You are such a tiny thing.

Amber nodded. I was on ice for a while, and apparently, that has an effect on the pituitary gland. The therapies that have been tried have been unsuccessful.

Have you talked to Khytten?

I can't talk to animals.

Lidiya stared. Where are you from?

The capitol. I had to sneak over here for the day.

The older woman laughed. Why don t you move to Aksalla?

I can t get a visa. There are actives that need protection. I just want to move.

The prefect is right over there. Why don t you ask her?

Amber faded to soft grey. I can t do that. It s not my place.

Lidiya looked at her in astonishment. You are fading to invisible.

Oh. Amber pulled herself back. The food is really good.

The other woman nodded. It definitely is.

As if she had been willed over, the prefect walked up to them. Amber looked at the ice cream bar and moved away. Apologies.

No, miss. It was you I came to speak to.

Oh.

Was that solid illusion?

Yes, ma am. Amber nodded.

How long have you been able to do that?

Since I was thawed a decade ago.

I wonder why I haven't heard about such a magnificent activation?

Amber swallowed. I am from the capitol. They don't have a use for it, so no one knows about it.

Would you consider bringing that talent to Aksalla on occasion?

She swallowed again. I would like to, but I don't qualify for a work visa.

What?

I have been denied twice for a work and occupancy visa. I wanted to move close to Litha. She shrugged. Sorry.

Why were you denied?

They stipulated that since I had no family to sponsor me, I was a risk.

I see. Didn't you mention Litha?

Amber felt tears well up. I didn't have her contact information. I couldn't ask her.

The prefect sighed. I am beginning to understand. You two were separated?

I was put in stasis before she was born, and everyone forgot about me. When our parents died, they went through probate and found references to me there. They let me out, but I looked like a toddler. I grew up in care, but they examined me at every opportunity, and this was the final result now that I am all grown up.

Wait. How old are you from birth to now?

Forty-one, forty-two. She shrugged. I am not exactly sure.

Would you be willing to take some supplementation to finish your growth?

Um, sure, but I have to go home in four hours. She shrugged.

You are a fan of the rules?

They keep everything understandable.

Amber, are you an omega?

Amber paused and nodded slowly. That s what the scans indicated. I have weird glands in strange places.

I see. Who knows about that?

The cr che.

Of course. Let me introduce you to Litha s boss, Zera. She employs a lot of young actives, and she knows how to do all the paperwork to get them in.

Amber blushed. I applied to Z-Tech. I don t have any qualifications. Denied.

Let s see what we can come up with.

The prefect put an arm around her and walked her over to where Litha s boss was congratulating the couple.

Zera and Litha smiled at Amber. Litha said, That was wonderful, Amber. Thank you.

You are welcome. It was fun to use my activation for entertainment.

The prefect looked to Zera. Amber is trying to get a work visa but needs an employer.

Zera nodded. What can you do, Amber?

Um, cleaning or courier work, I guess. Maybe working in a kitchen or coffee cart?

Zera's eyes softened. No secondary education?

It was a place to live or a place to study when I turned eighteen. I chose living and a string of entry-level jobs.

Litha looked confused. I could sponsor you. We may have been born in the capitol, but our grandparents and great-grandparents were Aksallan.

Zera brought up a file, and the prefect snorted.

Quiet, Salmat. We are at a party. You aren't seeing this. Zera grinned. Amber watched the woman do something and inhaled. Wow. Well, they are definitely watching you. They have alerted the team to a fugitive and are coming to bring you home.

I play music and show pictures. I am not a security threat.

Litha frowned. Solid light is a weapon. How long will this crown last?

Until midnight or I fall asleep.

And I will explain to you how that can be used as a weapon.

Amber blushed. I know how; I just didn't think they did.

The prefect laughed. Apparently, they did. I am being asked to put a bolo out on you.

Amber paled. I will go home.

Litha wrapped her arms around her. I will keep you here.

I am not causing a fuss on your wedding. I am not going to have a team come in here and extract me.

Zera chuckled. The team is here. They will take you home after the party.

What?

Torun runs my team. Arcady and Kritz's team have no interest in leaving early, Zera stated. Everyone is already here. There won't be a scene or panic or ordering around.

Amber looked around and realized that everyone invited was an active, and quite a few were wearing formal bodysuits. They are all here.

Have you been retrieved before? Zera asked softly.

Yes, they send Morcaddo to get me. He hauls me around like a dumped kitten. He yells at me and shakes me, she muttered.

Litha scowled. I am going to fry him. Why does he do that?

We were in crèche together, and since I stopped growing when I was fourteen, he treats me like I am a teen trying to run from home.

Litha paused. Oh. In that case, I will have Sergei smack him around or maybe one of Dmitri's crowd.

The prefect snorted. Or Salat. He is very protective of young women since he is now father to so many of them.

Litha said, I hadn't thought about it, but they could have brought the kids.

Ekron was playing, and there was an audience around him. Amber looked around, and the amount of power on her sister's property was astonishing. They could mount another attack on Uradda after dessert.

The prefect smiled. They like date night. They are not going straight home. Torene has some plans.

Amber looked in the same direction the prefect was looking, and there was a lovely woman with long brown hair, a pretty dress, and astonishing upper equipage. The other woman next to her was moving protectively as they talked to someone else over puff pastries.

The prefect nodded and smiled at Litha. Please excuse us. I want to introduce your sister to Khytten.

Litha smiled. That is a sensible idea as long as she doesn't have an aversion to people milk.

The prefect kept a hand behind Amber's back and steered her through the crowd. Those that were bumped just smiled and got out of the way. The power of pierogis. The mood was very mellow.

Amber met the woman who was only slightly taller than she was but far more... adult.

Hello.

Salmet, did you make a new friend? Adopting?

Amber sighed. I am twenty-two, physically.

Khytten smiled. Adult adoption. That is how Nelith became the grandma on my side to our little ones. Technically, my adopted mother.

The prefect paused. That is a thought. I have a full house; Khytten has two adopted already.

Amber said softly, Please stop. I don't need to know why it's a bad idea.

Khytten paused. I am sorry. I didn't mean to make light of your situation. Heck. I was in your situation. Are all members of your family petite?

She grimaced. I am Litha's older sister and Kiska's aunt.

Khytten's eyes widened. Oh. Wow.

Yeah, their storage method had some side effects. She sighed. Your mother-in-law brought me by to meet you. Do you know why?

Khytten stared at her. Oh, yeah. I have managed to help other actives regain their missing height.

And she made my son and the good doctor taller as well.

Khytten smiled. Come by tomorrow, and we will work out a course of treatment.

Amber nodded, but her soul froze. Yes, of course.

The prefect smiled. All solved.

Amber nodded and looked around. Litha was talking with Sergei, and there was a sweet expression on her face. He looked toward her and beckoned to her, so she walked over.

Litha started with, Feel free to say no.

Noted.

Sergei smiled. We want to dance for our guests, and your music is so beautifully haunting, we wondered if you would play while we performed.

Amber smiled. Of course.

They named the piece, and she followed them to the barn with the polished floor where the doors were opened wide, and she had one assignment. She was to show their dance, flaws and all.

They kicked Ekron off his little spot by the barn door, and Amber manifested her violin while they got their pointe shoes on. Seeing Sergei having fun with it made Amber's heart warm. Like Litha, he preferred dance to breaking heads. It was a good characteristic.

The moon was up, and as Amber began to play, the moonlight wrapped around the couple and shot off in bright ribbons. They began to move, twist, and leap, and Amber wrapped starlight and moonlight ribbons around them and sent them out to the crowd.

Sergei was shirtless and wearing wide-legged, flowing trousers. He handled Litha easily, and she trusted his hands on her.

They went through the long measures as if they had practiced for years, and each step was in sync. Litha's leaps took her higher than a human could go.

When the song was over, the couple was in a strange pose. Sergei was leaning forward in a lunge, and Litha was draped over his back, facing the stars. It was a striking pose, and Amber smiled softly. It was nice to see her sister so happy.

She dismissed her instrument and the effects that had bound the gathering together.

The hand that clamped on the back of her neck and lifted her was agonizing. She screamed as the contact burned her nervous system. She kicked weakly and shrieked for help that never came. She must have gone over curfew. Morcaddo was here, and he was going to bring her home.

* * * *

Litha watched her sister being shaken like a small dog in the grip of the grey-green male with tusks. He was wearing a capitol team uniform and glaring at Amber.

Litha's eyes were hot. Put her down.

She is past curfew and a dangerous active. She will be up on charges for using her activation as soon as she is booked. He shook her again, and the crying sounds that Amber was making continued.

Stop hurting her!

Zera walked up to him. Drop her. Now.

He sneered.

Zera stepped back. Gentlemen, please rescue the young lady. The ladies today aren't dressed for it.

Sergei stepped forward, wrapped shadows around Amber, and they reappeared twenty feet away.

Litha watched her sister twitching while her eyes rolled in pain.

She hovered, and when the men stepped aside, she burned him with a thin stripe every inch and a half wide on his entire body. His screams made her smile. She hadn

t spared any skin.

He was writhing slowly on the ground, and she walked over and crouched on him. She tapped the raw and burned skin. I just want to point out a few things. One, you assaulted my sister. Two, this is a wedding full of actives. Three, there are governmental representatives from five nations here, and four, it was my wedding. Who are you to hurt someone so physically unmatched? I am guessing you knew her as a child, and when you grew and she didn't, you pressed your advantage? They told you that you could do what you wanted as long as the damage wasn't permanent, so you did. Well, you get to go home empty-handed today. Your capitol team members will take you. They are all global class and are going to chat with you on your way back. She smiled. I am smaller than you, but I can turn you to ash with the tap of my finger. I don't because I have self-control and am not a monster. Look into self-control. Next time we meet, I will not use it.

Sergei lifted her off him, and Torun lifted the man, walking out with his team, and they went skyward.

Where is Amber?

Torene was healing her. Figured it couldn't get worse. She's right over... He turned, and she was gone.

Litha sighed and got a ping. She's with Feral. They are on the island.

Salmet looked at her and said softly, We agreed with Khytten that she could come back tomorrow. We hadn't realized what that would mean. I haven't dealt with this in years. The capitol is usually eager to dispose of actives.

Litha murmured, Especially when there are ties to Aksalla. She should have been turned over when she was a toddler.

Salmet frowned. I will have to check her file. I am also bracing for a call from the capitol.

Zera nodded. Me, too.

Litha got a ping. She's safe, and she's napping. Xeva and her family are taking care of her. The seers are saying she's supposed to be there.

Litha sent a message to Amber and tried to make it as loving and supportive as she could.

She lowered her arm and sighed. Well, that is appropriate for me and Sergei. Going along well until we aren't.

Sergei walked over to her. She is well?

She's on the island with Xeva.

Do you want to go?

No. If we went tonight, she would be upset. She wants us to have a honeymoon. As soon as that is over, I am going to ask her if she wants to come home.

He nodded. Where she should be.

Maybe I will get her a tiny house so she can have a quiet zone if she needs it.

Zera said, What if she stays in the islands?

Then, she will be safe from the Sethir. She's an omega, so the island is a good place for her. They aren't in the treaty zone. She's allowed to fight back to her fullest extent.

Salmet blinked. She s an omega? She looks so tiny.

She s the longest stasis case in current history. She started manifesting when she was a toddler, and the radiation freaked our parents out and the researchers, so they put her in stasis, and she remained that way for twenty years. They restarted her when our parents died.

Zera nodded. That gives me a place to start.

Salmet nodded. Me, too... oh... they did it on purpose. When she was legally an adult, they had the right to claim her as a research subject even if she was a child in body. It was a strictly numbers thing. No one would question if she was an adult on paper. They would be able to observe and probe her to a level that would not be allowed in a legal child.

Litha whispered, I am going to be sick.

Salmet apologized. I am sorry. We will look into this, and I think I have an idea of how to demand she be given citizenship in Aksalla. She looked at Litha and said, If she wants a home, she has one.

Litha smiled. Really?

Really.

Sergei hugged her. This will work out, little star. She is safe, she is cared for, and she is on a tropical island. She is having more of a honeymoon than we are.

She relaxed into him. I will try and figure that out.

Zera asked, Have you always been a dancer, Litha?

Sure. Right out of high school. My parents thought it was good for self-control.

Salmet cocked her head. I think Riko and I saw one of your performances on a date. You were spectacular but always soloed.

Yes. I like duets, though. As long as there is no tickling.

Sergei laughed. That is a weird place to be ticklish.

Litha grinned. It s a family thing. Speaking of family, that thug is lucky that Torun hauled him off before Calina got there. She had my big rolling pin and a meat skewer.

He laughed. She s deadly with both. Must have gone to get them as soon as he grabbed Amber.

Are you taking her home?

No, Drin booked rooms for her, my aunt, niece, and Kiska in town. A transporter will take them home tomorrow.

Litha knew Kiska could get around on her own, but she smiled. Good.

Salmet said, As prefect, I would like to offer both of you positions at the training centre. You seem to have control over complicated activations, and it is something the current generation needs to learn.

Can we talk about this in a few days?

Salmet nodded. Of course.

Zera muttered, I would like to be included in on that. We have been looking into creating our own security force.

Sergei chuckled. Mercenaries.

Private army. It can be useful.

Salmet glared at Zera. I will meet with them first.

Litha laughed, and she and Sergei returned to the barn, slowly dancing together with no music. She felt that eyes were on them, but she didn't care. Since the moment she had taken his hand, he felt so desperately right.

* * * *

Sergei held her against him in the small hours of the morning. His mind replayed the first thing he remembered, Warrior, you have survived this long. Let us get you free. The world is bright, and you will be in the open air soon.

He stroked her hair. She was bright. She was his air and his light and the earth beneath them both. With her, he was free, and he would survive to see what their new lives would bring them. If family came, good. If children came, good. If his little star smiled slowly at him and called him a dumbass every day, he knew that he was in the right place for the right woman.